THE BROWN BUTTERFLY

a novel

by

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To Mother

CHAPTERS

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LIST OF RELATIVES

Mother, Søren's mother

Freja, Søren's older sister

Kai, Søren's younger brother

Grandma, Søren's grandmother

Uncle Jonas, Mother's brother

Aunt Siv, Mother's sister

Eskild, Aunt Siv's son

Mag, Aunt Siv's daughter

Yap, Grandma's big male dog

Yip, her little female one

The first speech I will utter
in the morning when I arise:
may the cross of Christ be as armor about me.

Under the protection of my lord I will gird myself today—
I hear one sneeze.
It is not my God; I will not believe in it.

—"Kyntaw geir" from *The Black Book of Carmarthen*

Part I

Moss

CHAPTER I

THE BOOK FAIR

IT WAS, at any rate, somewhere other than the boys' room to go during lunch. Just to impress himself, Søren bought a laminated synopsis of Latin verbs. He was also tempted by the notebooks with endangered species or female Nobel Prize winners on them. And the math-themed candy: not just educational, it glowed in the dark.

Most of the kids were gathered around the video games. The books, scattered here and there, were designed along the same glossy lines. But everyone could see through to the dead paper inside. Søren opened one at random:

"Lika's focus narrowed from the tsaritsa under the glass to her own reflection riding on top. *So these are our faces*, she thought. The candlelight throbbed, sharpening their noses and hollowing their cheeks, replacing their eyes with a concave blackness speckled with fire."

So many words! It was tedious, wasn't it, always being

acted upon? And painful, making room inside yourself for other people's thoughts.

Yet there was something in even the murkiest prose—a thread on which the words were strung. Following it, through winding passages, provided the fun. It was a kind of program; but one no computer could run. Turning off a game, you felt as extinguished as the screen. But, closing a book, you found it had taken you somewhere new, even if your surroundings *looked* the same.

The selection here wasn't great. Certain classics were still allowed: *Jenny, A Doll's House, Frankenstein*… With frozen irony, the contemporary titles—*How to Be Normal*, *An Ugly Stepsister's Revenge*, *Embracing the Monster Within*—repeated similar themes. But the monster didn't look frightening—more like a stuffed animal, clasped to the heroine's chest.

This year, there was a special on "Banned Books." Not books that were currently banned, of course: no Hergé, Kipling, or Twain. There was nothing glamorous about *that.* Rather, these were children's books that had been expelled from American schools, decades ago, for having too much sex. Plenty of swearing and violence, too, Søren found, leafing through. Still, they didn't sell. In 21st century Norway, such things seemed far less transgressive than the math-themed candy, which wasn't even sugar-free.

He picked up a book whose cover depicted multiethnic children on dinosaurs, fighting Nazis. They didn't look much like his mom. He picked up a set of *Pippi.* It was incomplete. He was trying to remember what Pippi could possibly have done when a beloved sequence of letters caught his eye. *Out of Africa,* by Isak Dinesen? *Here?*

Only that morning, the radio had been discussing the recent decision to remove her from all libraries, not merely restrict her to adults-only zones. Søren had trouble believing

that anyone, besides himself, really cared. Yet the pundits had found a spokesman for the evil side: an emeritus professor, obviously old and white, he hadn't come off very well. To the charge that *Out of Africa* was "the last untoppled monument to European racism and colonial ambition," he could only object that it was "a damned good book, aesthetically speaking, full of truths about the human heart." And a great deal of other nonsense.

No—the title in Søren's hands turned out to be wittily subversive: *Out of Africa: 100 Things We Couldn't Do Without.* The cover showed famous soccer players, rappers, Martin Luther King—even an image from Disney's *Lion King,* which *was* one of Søren's favorite cartoons.

The others were… But he forced himself to stop. It was a fragile way to build yourself, having favorite things: like staring into a mirror, at just the right angle, or saying "I love you" to a cat. Yet Søren's lists continued to grow, ranking cereals, countries, trees…

The only categories that really mattered, though, were books and music. They didn't just tell you who you were and what kind of world you wanted to live in; they *were* who you were, and the world you actually lived in, however hideously your more literal circumstances, for instance high school, might stand in contrast to it.

"If literature can provide an escape from a world where people do not care about classical music, then that's what it ought to do," Grandma said, and Søren agreed. It felt a bit like pulling up those lovely Japanese vines that were invading her island: one satisfying rip led to another, then another. Through E. M. Forster, he'd discovered Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*; a few more tugs had unearthed Pushkin and Mussorgsky, tightly intertwined. Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, which he'd first stumbled across in

Hollinghurst, grew right alongside those of Grieg. And all their roots were tangled up with whatever Mother happened to be practicing at the time: the Scarlatti, Brahms, or Poulenc which released their seeds into Søren's mind.

Grandma Astrid was the origin both of Søren's books and the posh voice he used for reading them, whether silently or out loud. Her unexpurgated classics smelled of Otterøy even when he opened them in a bathroom stall. Familiar with each blemish in their thick pages, he put off rereading them as long as possible, until he'd forgotten the sentences just enough that, reencountering them, he felt both recognition and surprise: a bit like seeing Eskild again at the beginning of each summer, or hearing a snatch of Sibelius' Seventh Symphony… But there he was, listing his favorite things again, making them—and himself—a bit less real.

When the bell rang, Søren actually felt relieved. Life away from Otterøy, when he tried to get a firm hold on it, came apart in his hands, a series of disconnected observations, almost more white space than text. He kept an enormous journal, but the order of its entries hardly mattered. During the school year, the only plot worth speaking of was found inside forbidden books.

Or else it came prowling around them. He'd noticed Hanne watching him put *Out of Africa* away, and wondered, with a shudder, what would have happened if she'd caught him with the real thing.

Later, Søren came to think of this year, his last in the outside world, as the Year of Lost Books. He only lost three—but they were his favorites—and the way he lost them had a special rhythm, a sense of serving him right. As a title, *The Year of Lost Books* might be trite, but it reminded him of Proust, whose memories did even more than Søren's own to recall his childhood's sense of danger, synaesthesia,

refuge, ritual, and helpless disobedience.

He tried so hard to follow the rules! But if you *didn't* read during class, at least sometimes, it seemed very likely time itself would stop, trapping you in Non-Western Studies for the rest of your life. You might not get into trouble, however, if your book came from the school library. In fact, you got extra credit if you filled out a form with a summary, your favorite part, and how the book exposed the oppressive power structures in society. With small modifications, the same response worked for every book.

Unfortunately, even Søren couldn't bring himself to reread the story of *Aliyah, the Immigrant who Became Prime Minister of Norway* more than five or six times. And when even Dickens failed to meet the library's latest requirements for promoting democratic values—perhaps due to Scrooge's improbable change of heart—Søren began to spend class drawing flowers in the margins of his notes, or copying out the poems he had memorized: *Intimations of Immortality,* the prologue to *Ruslan and Ludmilla,* Carmen's arias, Yeats. By lifting you out of yourself, poetry, especially in foreign languages, did something anonymous to your face. The other students generally contented themselves with pretending that Søren did not exist, and Søren pretended this was all he really wanted. Once the teacher, too, had gotten used to his invisibility, Søren no longer had to participate. If asked to discuss a question with their "neighbors," the students sitting on either side of him would simply talk right through him. He could barely remember the last time he'd had to do a problem on the board.

Ms. Lund, however, could see him. The new Language Arts teacher, she'd won everyone over on her first day with her ironic pince-nez and the idealistic approach she took to her work. Her long, blonde hair, in particular, had convinced

Søren to take her at her word—almost—when she assigned the class to write about their favorite books. He chose *Middlemarch*, the talisman currently hiding in his bag, rather than Isak Dinesen; it hadn't occurred to him that, for Ms. Lund, at least, George Eliot might also be just another dead white male. In fact, he felt so confident Ms. Lund would become his friend, if only his essay were good enough, he even took *Middlemarch* out of his bag to look up some quotes.

"What's this about?" she said, picking it up. The rest of the class stopped writing to watch.

"Love," he began, and she wrinkled her nose.

"A romance novel?"

"Yes…" He felt sure he was going to be suspended, but Ms. Lund just confiscated his book. She looked at it for so long, though, Søren wondered if she were going to take it home. You never could tell—there were odd holdouts here and there… Could she be, like Grandma, a woman with a stash?

"Now, can any of the *girls* please tell me about their favorite book?" she asked.

Hanne raised her hand.

"I wrote about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,"* she said. "It's about exposing the oppressive power structures in society. It shows how your dreams can come true, no matter the color of your skin."

For a giddy moment, Søren hoped Ms. Lund had actually read the book. Then he remembered that if she had, it would have been the revised version, in which the Oompa Loompas, now orange not black, take over the chocolate factory and repurpose it to manufacture eco-friendly snacks.

"In conclusion, this book celebrates the power of being yourself," Hanne said, and Ms. Lund suggested she consider a career in academia.

Now, was a boy willing to share "their" essay? Nobody raised their hand. Søren doubted any of the other boys had ever voluntarily read a book.

Apparently unwilling to embarrass her pupils too much on her first day, Ms. Lund dropped the subject and asked everyone to introduce themselves.

"Now that I've had some time to observe you," she said, "it will be interesting for me to hear your backstories." *Please leave out nothing painful*, one half-expected her to say.

She seemed to think that Mary's desire to become a horse vet was a gender cliché, and that Adnan, having lost no relatives in the Syrian Civil War, had let his people down.

"Still, I'm sure you haven't always felt welcome here," she said, as if to summarize his remarks.

"I guess not," he said.

She was even disappointed with Hanne, whose mother stayed at home.

"Why doesn't she work?" Ms. Lund asked. "Does your dad have all the power or something?"

"I think she'd just rather take care of her kids," Hanne said. "She has a university degree…" But this only seemed to make matters worse.

Lars, with five sisters, received a scolding for overpopulating the Earth.

"Well, you're here *now,*" Ms. Lund said. "But in the future, you probably shouldn't have any kids."

"OK," Lars said, looking down.

Søren was mentally preparing his biography: *Mother is a piano teacher*—somehow, this always felt like a lie. *I have an older sister, Freja, and a younger brother, Kai*… If he milked Freja's diagnosis, would Ms. Lund be charmed?

But, apparently fed up with her students' middle-class lives, she broke off the introductions long before she got to

Søren, and marched to the front of the room to deliver her first real lecture, on the use of genderless pronouns in Norsk: hardly a difficult topic, even if most of the books you read had been written in those benighted times when a writer's meaning was determined less by his sex than by what he said, and Søren allowed his mind to wander. As usual, it took the paths toward Otterøy.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream… etc.

Months might pass before Mother asked for her copy of *Middlemarch*. She tended to reread it in the spring. Søren could say he'd left it on a bench, and when he came back, there'd been nothing but crows.

But it was impossible to lie, somehow, after almost getting hit by a van. He'd been walking slow in order to put off tomorrow, and someone's leaf blower was blowing, so he hadn't been able to hear the van. It honked and swerved. The cat on top looked back at him. He felt pretty sure it was the Princess. She visited Mother about twice a week, especially in winter. She'd lean against the glass till Mother let her in, then lie on the piano while Mother played. Sometimes, Søren was allowed to give her a meal out of a can.

The truth made Mother angry, but not primarily at him.

"What's your teacher's name?" she said, getting out her phone. "Hello? This is *Mrs. Wistling*." And Søren sat and listened to his mother make a permanent enemy for him out of Ms. Lund.

CHAPTER II
WISTLING'S GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER

PEOPLE ASSUMED, often enough for Søren to feel it as often, that his parents were divorced. It did seem plausible: Mother had taken Grandma's maiden name as an adult, and Søren himself sometimes had trouble remembering that his father was really dead. He knew it was a flourish—he didn't really believe her—when Mother said, "The only reason to allow divorce is if the woman has committed adultery or the man has lost his job."

He wished, just sometimes, she would let her sentences go unsaid, long enough for him to hear the ones she was keeping at bay. Not, in this case, the obvious garbage about marriage as a celebration of love, but the cleverer dissenters in her head, whom she vanquished as if with a silenced gun. How he loved the smile with which she took aim!

Her speech was so clear partly because she always seemed to be reading aloud, turning invisible pages with her eyes, partly because of her accent, which came from Sweden even though she did not. Søren had inherited it, along with most of her good excuses for not fitting in. In fact, their accent came from Otterøy, which no one in Moss could be expected to know. Certainly, Søren would never tell.

Yet he did feel strangely at home when Mother took him to Sweden, twice a year, to an opera. Oslo was closer, but Sweden hadn't banned Wagner yet. Usually, Mother settled for Göteborg, but this year she went as far as the palace theater at Drottningholm, where Søren's belief that history had peaked in the 18th century was set in paper, plaster, and imitation stone. Strangely, the part that reminded him most of Otterøy was not the endless succession of luminous backdrops, representing the sea, or even the hush as the curtain went up, but rather the flicker, just below the action, of the conductor's baton, and the glimmer, just above it, of gold leaf. At its best, the music lifted those frayed edges, raising a wind from the world you couldn't see.

On disc, Søren preferred *Tristan und Isolde,* or *Rusalka,* but on stage his favorite spectacle was *Madama Butterfly.* Her coming apart seemed so complete. Her strength was hardly the sort he'd been taught to admire, which was perhaps why it seemed so real. He felt sure that if she'd been asked beforehand whether she wanted to be born, Madama Butterfly would have said yes.

To impress his mother, however, Søren learned to worship *Parsifal.* There was nobility in its world—the main quality missing, after all, from popular music. The strong instruments protected the weak, the choir's worship was never of itself, and somewhere, out of sight, there was always a little man waiting to sound the trumpet, strike the gong.

"There is no authority that is not of God," Mother said. Even the worst orchestral music shared in the divine mandate of its tradition. Unlike Søren, she preferred operas where the orchestra did most of the talking. It wasn't people, but "structure," she listened for.

Yet her sense of hierarchy was incompatible, where the distinctions were sufficiently clear, with malice. She was the kind of person who'd apologize to a dog—and not just because the person who owned it might be around to hear.

"The nature of the commoner is always to be on the lookout for an opportunity to make an acquisition; the nature of the aristocrat is always to be looking for an opportunity to make a sacrifice," she said. True condescension was shown by humility, not arrogance. Wasn't Christ's crucifixion the supreme example of *noblesse oblige*? And if history could be redeemed by such acts, there really didn't have to be more than one. They didn't even "really" have to have happened. When Mother held up examples for Søren, they might as easily be Don Quixote or King Arthur as Jeanne d'Arc or Saint Radegund. Even Hitler, by virtue of losing, had acquired a patina of sacrifice. Though there'd been arrogance enough in the way he'd tried to win…

Grandma had met Hitler as a child. Specifically, when *she* was a child, though sometimes it sounded as if it had been the other way around. In the 1930s, he'd come to Otterøy, seeking moral support. Wistling had always provided him with inspiration. "He was such an herbivore," Grandma said. "So cautious and eager-to-please. With his open gaze—you could tell it made no difference between furniture and toys, children and adults. Immediately, you knew he'd be fun to play with if you could get him alone with some tin soldiers…

"He encouraged me to become a composer, very earnestly, which seemed strange, since I didn't even play the

piano. But we had one in the room, and he sat down and played a tune from *Carmen*, over and over again." She laughed. "It's hard to reconcile my memory of him with my knowledge of the man who painted those *awful* pictures…

"But at least kitsch *means* well. At least it's *trying*. It's an honest mistake if its beauty fails to run deep… I sometimes think dolphins, painting a seascape, would produce the kitschiest seascape ever seen. Though perhaps, as humans, we'd have difficulty recognizing it as such."

Grandma spent about six hours a day knitting sweaters for a Bergen charity shop. They cost $500 each, which tourists apparently considered fair. But she seemed ashamed of her work. Søren might steal glimpses—snowflakes, reindeer—as they emerged in her lap, but he never got a good look at the whole thing before she'd shipped it off.

"Pain is part of the truth of life," she'd say. "It's more interesting to do the things you don't like than the things you do." She must have really disliked making sweaters.

She often listened to opera while knitting, making it obvious she wished to be alone. So, although he was dying for someone to talk about books with, Søren never ran to her to gush. Yet his new favorite novel was always likely to be an old favorite of hers, since he'd found it on her shelves.

"I bet it was embarrassing to hear Hildegard of Bingen talk about her visions," Grandma said. "In literature, as in life, God is the ideal occasion for 'show, don't tell.'" It was a lesson Søren never forgot.

CHAPTER III
MOTHER AND THE IMPURE SUBSTANCE

LIKE her unjustly hanged great-grandpa, Søren's mother probably exaggerated Nazism's interest in sweeping away mass culture in order to reconnect Europe with its aristocratic past. But, like her unjustly hanged great-grandpa, she seemed to trust an idea the more it was despised. Why, if Hitler had not been misunderstood, should he have come to symbolize evil to the same people who hated Shakespeare, Dinesen, Wagner? What kind of evil ran like a silver thread through everything that was good?

It wasn't hard for Søren to understand the question. At school, he'd been taught to blame the Holocaust on *The Merchant of Venice,* the oppression of women on *The Taming of the Shrew.* His class wasn't allowed to read the original texts, but the pedagogical summaries made it clear: racism and

sexism, raised from the status of moral foibles to the deadliest of sins, were all that separated the heaven of Norway's *now* from the hell of Europe's *then*.

Given such a choice, Mother sided with Dante *and* Mussolini, Cervantes *and* the Spanish Inquisition. She didn't goose step around town or anything; it was just a pretty way she had, a whiff of *au contraire* to everything she said, a hidden dissidence that made her smile at Norwegian public radio's belief in "every human's equal worth," and mention her full name in situations where it wasn't really necessary; for instance, yesterday on the street… Still, American missionaries could hardly be expected to know who—or what—a Wistling was.

She loved other people so much in theory! That is, she had no friends, yet she'd talk to missionaries in the street. Søren was proud of her the way Americans must be proud of their Statue of Liberty: not only for how she looked, but because her looks became a symbol for so much else. It might be possible to think, but never believe, that beauty and virtue were not the same.

Yet Mother's beauty was most visible to those who'd known her long, and could view the cobwebs settling so quickly around her blondeness as incidental rather than essential to her face. Of all strangers, middle-aged women most often stopped to stare. From fifteen feet, Mother might have stepped out of a Waterhouse painting, minus the paint, or off a billboard selling—well—anything. She might have been the only person in the world who would have genuinely hated to hear that.

"Hatred destroys a person, even hatred of evil. Love enriches a person, even love of evil"—a mantra she repeated so often, Søren realized it must have good reasons not to go without saying.

As he grew up, he saw the reasons were everywhere. Whenever Mother encountered popular music, video games, television, tabloids, or professional sports, her eyes would darken, lips vanish like certain colors before a storm.

But the storm rarely broke.

"It's as absurd to hate people who dislike classical music as it would be to hate chimpanzees," she'd say. "Or dolphins. They're wonderful creatures in their own right."

Mother loved animals. It seemed like a gruesome penance that she had no dogs. Surely they weren't *that* expensive? Anyway, Grandma, who loved dogs more than grandchildren, would have footed the bill.

"Little Ham, little Ham, who made Thee?" Mother murmured in English, lifting a pan out of the oven on Christmas Day. Even slicing vegetables seemed to make her sad. Most days, she didn't cook at all, but kept the fridge full of bread and carrots, grapes and things kids could manage on their own. Søren enjoyed taking care of himself, but Freja and Kai were almost never seen to eat. His family prided itself on skeletal thinness in a world where poor people showed they still existed—deep down—by growing "abominably fat."

Mother ordered most of her groceries online: "Cashiers give me the evil eye. But so do self-checkout machines."

Her own meals were both monastic and epicurean. Standing in front of the window, blinds down, she'd eat while reading a book propped open on her music stand. It took her thirty minutes to down a piece of toast, and no person could enjoy a single raisin more. Dessert, queen of the meals, lasted from eight-thirty until ten, though it consisted only of three chocolates on a bed of oats. Nipping off their shells, between sips of kefir, she reminded Søren of a heron, plucking molluscs from a swamp. How she hated for anyone to watch!

But Søren didn't have to watch in order to be part of her scene. Reading in bed on the other side of the wall, he seemed to turn each page in sympathy with hers. He could practically feel her music washing up over his toes.

Her rules had many exceptions! To the ban on background music, she excepted actual background music, such as Handel's accompaniment to the royal fireworks, or riverboats, which could brighten a book's lights, or lend rhythm to its flow. Søren must have heard each suite a thousand times; he could almost see and touch, as well as hear them, now.

Mother's fancy candies must have been hidden well, for Søren never found them. Kai, a creature of nooks and crannies, must have done, but he would never tell. He didn't even like sweets.

Søren had his own less golden hoard: cheap *lösgodis* (they tasted better in Swedish) that he'd walked all the way to ICA for, sweating with nerves. Jam berries rolled in beads, flaky bricks of sunflower seeds, mint taffy, as durable as gum… His Christmas money had stretched surprisingly far. His stash was going stale, but it certainly wasn't *worse* that way. He'd unwrap each piece slowly, for Mother's hearing was prodigious when it came to noise.

Her teeth were uncommonly bad, more a consequence than cause, it seemed, of never smiling. What, her mottled beauty seemed to say, was everyone smiling about? In 21st century Norway, even bad teeth could seem distinguished, proof that Mother, at least, was not oblivious to the general moral decay.

For if Mother were a blighted tree, other people were the beetles that infected her. Their glittering teeth were the opposite of clean. Always on display, they seemed meant to be reassuring; yet Søren couldn't help feeling scared.

Whenever there were a lot of grownups in one room, although he could see that they were talking, all he could hear was the click, click, clicking of their teeth.

"I wonder where the Princess has gone," Mother said, looking out the window. "I hope her owners aren't giving her too much to eat. Perhaps she got cancer… She was getting awfully fat."

CHAPTER IV
THE POCKETKNIFE FIGHT

SØREN STARTED each school day blissfully naked and alone, praying to the shower. Behind the glass, it burned and sang. His prayer was simply that this bathroom might continue drifting through space, that this silvery reprieve—the celesta solo from his *Fantasia* nightmares—might go on and on and on. He pressed his head into the mat, then laid it on the tile. He loved the transition from hot to cold, the smell of bleach to the smell of mold. His skull began to wail. He cracked the door but didn't get in. Some days, he never did, preferring the droplets' prickly feet to the shower's conclusive act of heat. It never really felt hot for long.

Afterwards, he combed his hair into the required shape. Vanity, after all, was a form of hope. It had to be the same every day, until someone noticed; then it would have to change.

School was only four blocks away. He walked a few paces

behind Freja and Kai, who were already getting into their different acts of being alone.

As the pneumatic doors hissed open, he was struck by a billow of noise. As they sighed shut, a dome settled over his head. He seemed to have landed on the ocean floor. Around him stretched a plain of purple stone. Far above, the sun rode on rippled glass.

Children's voices were just muddy echoes here, leaking into his dome. He'd wipe them away during silences, for instance an exam, but as soon as the gabbling recommenced, the mud would trickle in again, falling on his hair, drizzling down his face. It tasted a lot like glue.

There *were* occasions when a fellow child would turn to him, with a friendly air, and say something meant to be understood. "Sorry?" Søren would reply, eager not to miss his chance. "Can you repeat that?" But the child would just shake its head, look away, or repeat the question in a different way, no longer willing to be pleased by any possible reply.

Teachers' words cleared a path through the noise, like vinegar through oil. Søren could understand every word she said, for instance, when one day Mrs. Walstrøm said two interesting things in a row. The first was that Finland had more islands than Canada. The second was that an elephant's skin was six inches thick.

Of course, it depended on how you defined an island. And "inches," and "skin"… But, eventually, Søren decided that Mrs. Walstrøm was just fibbing, like the time she'd said *Les Troyens* told "the whole history of the Middle East," and praised its "relevance"—a sort of superficial resemblance to "current events." Still, she was his favorite teacher—the only one who'd said anything nice about opera at all.

One day, Moss had a pocketknife fight in which two boys

pretty much failed to get hurt. It seemed like a scene from American TV, and Søren's school, proud of how tough its reputation had become, responded with a new course on multiculturalism, and a ban on bookbags. This made it hard to bring books to school, but still pretty easy to bring pocketknives. (Lars and Jamal, having made each other into local celebrities, became close friends.)

But the real reason school felt unsafe had nothing to do with knives. It came from the constant pressure to believe things you knew were wrong. It felt like…well, being trapped in a house where the television was always on. And no one seemed to mind!

If you managed to survive to adulthood—Søren couldn't help abusing a word like *survive*—there was escape:

"Looking around," Mother said, "I am grateful, after all, for the freedom to be me. I can live every day in opposition to the culture that surrounds me, and nobody really cares. I have money, food, and shelter, for me and my children, even though I've done hardly anything to deserve them. I could listen to Beethoven for twelve hours a day, if I wanted. But I find I don't really *want*…" She sighed. "In the Soviet Union, for instance, I'd probably have died a martyr of some kind, which wouldn't have been nearly as glamorous as it sounds. But in Europe, today, the only form of dissidence that will get you taken seriously is Nazism. Even Wistling might have been forgiven, or at least forgotten, if not for his unfortunate entente…"

Of course, Søren had to keep Wistling hidden. And hidden was the ideal place for Wistling's vines to twine themselves around his heart. When he felt so pale, sometimes fainting for a second out of sheer self-pity, unnoticed, in the middle of class, he thought it was because he was bleeding inside. And how *Das Lied von der Erde,* for

instance, or Fauré's *Requiem* tightened the thorns! When the hairs all over his body stood on end, and a wind blew at every pore, he felt the melancholy but reassuring conviction that his soul had somewhere better to go. That was the main thing: to lose yourself. Reading could do it, or music.

Or sleep. In general, Søren liked to think of God as a burning bush; but, at certain times of night, when it was no longer really possible to *think*, listening to Freja snore, or Mother talk in her sleep, Søren couldn't help believing in a kind old man with a beard the size of the sky. His eyes were sadder than it was possible to understand.

One day, Søren managed to hide behind the milk machine during lunch. He'd often thought how dark and sweet it must be back there, in the alcove where the old machine had sat. But there were always other children milling around until, one day, there weren't, and Søren had felt mystically certain of his own invisibility as he stepped across the wires.

The fridge's humming was a marked improvement on silence. Its perforated back was cleaner than its front in terms of everything but dirt. With a hundred kindly sounds and smells, it fanned him toward the brink of sleep. For fifteen minutes, he felt almost as happy as if he'd never been born.

He thought about Finland, where they'd abolished school altogether. No one in Finland watched TV. They had more islands than Canada. They worshipped Sibelius, and wrote their own music in his language. Søren had once met Rautavaara in a supermarket. He'd actually been wearing rose petals in his hair. Or was that just a trick of Søren's memory? He often remembered more flowers than could possibly have been there.

Really, Wistling's alliance with Hitler had been just as opportunistic as Finland's. It would have been perverse of

Mother to take nothing from Nazism but the rap…

Then Søren realized he was doing *exactly* the thing Mother would have held herself—perversely if possible—above: the ritual apology, especially to oneself; the shunning of the ugly kid on the playground; fearfully bleating, "*I'm* not the Enemy!", when surely, given friends like these, their Enemy was the right thing to be?

How he longed to worship something—almost anything—besides equality! Of course, it was nice that Norwegians took such good care of each other's bodies. But once you'd decided there was no heaven except on Earth, you'd condemned yourself to living—however comfortably—in hell.

If only one could live on Otterøy all year round! Technically, it *was* located on Earth. But there was no humanism in admitting that "we should love only God, but as a kind of cantus firmus to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. Earthly affection is one of these contrapuntal themes, a theme which enjoys autonomy of its own." Somewhere, there must be a church high enough for Mother—higher than Canterbury, higher than Rome. Its vaults were full of clouds. They smelled, faintly, of milk. Søren yawned.

The white noise grew sweeter, until, with a lurch, Søren realized the time. But, really, it was better to arrive a little late to class, letting you choose a seat among the leftovers without having to watch everyone leave an empty ring around you. True, as he sat down, Søren discovered that a corner of his shirt had been tucked into his underpants all day, but, on the whole, things had never turned out so well.

Ordinarily, you'd just attract *more* attention by trying to hide behind a milk machine. There were simpler ways of not being seen. During lunch, you could lock yourself inside a

bathroom stall. During class, you could watch the teacher and actually pay attention to what she said. If you tried to think about something interesting, even without the aid of a book, she could tell. Everyone could tell. Watching you escape into a better world, ordinary people *would* stick their feet in the door.

They didn't want to come in, exactly. Probably after ten years of Language Arts they *couldn't*. Their hatred, Mother explained, was exactly the hatred of those who have not toward those who have: the same futile impulse that had ravaged Russia and France; the retrovirus in Europe's history of progress that would at last reduce everyone to an equal degree of material wealth and spiritual impoverishment.

Sometimes, Søren wished Mother would just change their last name. It was like having Wistling's Rose tattooed across your face. But Mother hadn't taken her husband's *von* even when he'd laid it glittering at her feet. Gradually Søren, too, had come to feel the difference between embarrassment and shame. He'd grown proud not only of his family's treasures, but of the forces, now generally recognized as evil, that had resisted throwing them away. He tried not to flash his gold passport in any of its forms—concealing his accent, for instance, by never talking—but was flattered as well as frightened, increasingly, by the glances it turned his way. And he wouldn't be caught dead without a book somewhere on his person. For what would happen if he died that way?

Multiculturalism, Mother said, was grinding down your family jewels in order to share the dust. Diversity left everyone standing around with their hands full of sand. "Hitler's misapplication of Wistling's ideas may have led to crimes almost as bad as Stalin's or Mao's, but at least Nazism was based on good ideals. At least it *meant* well, trying to distinguish cultures rather than dissolve them, to build up

social order rather than tear it down. To assert natural hierarchy rather than defy it."

Perhaps it wasn't surprising Søren never spoke. Almost any word he could have chosen would have made an ordinary Norwegian explode.

"My next class is going to need this seat," Mrs. Walstrøm said, and Søren gaped at her for a moment, then fled. Had she noticed the roses on his notes?

In Language Arts, Ms. Lund was gone—giving birth, the substitute said, as she wrote one of her essay questions on the board: "What, if anything, should be meant by the phrase 'Norwegian values'?"

Søren began to write about his house. Mother had inherited it from Dad. A former gamekeeper's lodge, it still kept watch over streetlights, tramlines, and traffic signs in a forest of stained concrete and repurposed wood. The von Otterøy Apartments—the third cousins who owned them now lived in New York—were the largest but hardly most distressing consequence of not entailing property to the male line. Mother had taught Søren to relish the thought, whenever he looked around, that all this ought to be his—but full of deer and pine! He could literally smell it, sometimes. It was a beautiful way to see the world, holding out the possibility of a higher form of belonging, even in Moss. It was still a beautiful neighborhood, after two hundred years. But seven unlucky, fertile generations—not to mention inheritance tax—had left Dad with few other heirlooms. Still, Mother could arrange IKEA crap so that it looked like solid wood. In her hands, a Yamaha sounded like a Bösendorfer. Wherever she lived, presumably, would smell faintly of horse.

Purity—was that a Norwegian value? Almost certainly not. If Mother picked up ideas no one else would touch, it

was because they seemed clean. True, her own people had been potato farmers, once upon a time. But it wasn't *dirt* that made your hands dirty…

Of course, the more she hated hypocrisy in others, the more she saw it as a virtue in herself. The difference between righteousness and self-righteousness was as thin as the blade of a knife. "There's nothing more valuable than hypocrisy as a way to become a better person," she'd say. "Pretend you're kind, until you actually are. Pretend you understand French, until you actually do. That's why I'm in favor of all these people who go around pretending to like Schoenberg. Whether or not he's actually good, he lies in the direction of goodness, and by aiming at him, you improve." At another time, however, she'd described serialism as "a great metaphor for the horror of forced equality: the meaningless, hideous heart of liberalism, which seeks to do the same thing to human life that Schoenberg did to music." In any case, Søren wondered where all these people who went around pretending to like Schoenberg *were*. And how could he meet them? The answer, of course, was to take up permanent residence inside his mother's head.

To this end, he'd done his best. He'd undertaken, like the Little Mermaid, to walk on the blade of the knife. He'd pretended to like Schoenberg for hours at a time. And, over the years, his pretense of speaking foreign languages had hardened into actual Russian and French. But he was corroded by his daily immersion in the commonplace, repelled from Mother as if by chemistry whenever she said, "How sad to live in a time when people have grown blasé to the diminished 7th chord," (regarding *Looney Tunes*); or "That looks like one of those books written by people who can accept life in the 21st century," (regarding *Harry Potter*); or, wrinkling her nose at the suggestion that things weren't

better then—whenever then may have happened to be: "I *hope* I'd have been one of the people who was shocked by the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*."

And Søren knew she was right. He *was* blasé; he *did* enjoy *Harry Potter*; he would *not* have been shocked by the premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps,* even though shock were essential to understanding it correctly—enjoying it fully. But Stravinsky, whom Søren had first met in Disney's *Fantasia,* now felt so familiar, his rhythms seemed to caress, more than hammer, Søren's strings.

Yes, Søren exploited everything, even music, in his search for consolation. Nature herself, for Søren, went little deeper than Konrad Lorenz, up to his neck in a pond, being kissed by ducks. Very probably, Søren would have agreed to the extinction of the blue whale in exchange for being allowed to get a dog.

Yes, Norwegians valued nature. Søren wrote a few sentences about that.

But if they'd taken him to one of the concentration camps in occupied Europe, such as the Uffizi or the Louvre, where Wistling had sent the Philistines to think very hard about what they'd done, would Mother have let him go without a fight? Would she have denounced him herself? With Mozart and Rimbaud always in mind, she made few excuses for a person's youth. "Thomas Mann began *Buddenbrooks* when he was ******ing *nineteen.*" It was the only time he'd heard her swear.

Clearly, he had only a few years left to begin proving his worth.

He turned in his essay—there was little danger that the substitute would read it—and headed for the boys' room. It was time for Afternoon Mingle: in fine weather, a quarter hour's snacks and gossip on the lawn, for the others; but

Søren had an appointment with Gibbon.

Perhaps, in view of her attitude toward chimpanzees, Mother would have accepted Søren, on warm but condescending terms, if he'd shown a little more aptitude for being ordinary—for fitting into a world she viewed, after all, with more pity than contempt. Perched on the back of the toilet, Søren felt himself in grave danger of falling between stools, lacking both the strength to pursue Mother's superior form of happiness and the stupidity to settle for anything less. Perhaps he'd end up like Uncle Jonas, an aspiring author who'd never published anything; Mother was the only person he trusted to read his work, and she was not, in front of Søren, at least, impressed. "In order to be good," she said, "fantasy must be the expression of a mind that is too big for reality, rather than too small for it—which is more often the case."

She seemed to hold Uncle Jonas up as a warning, but Søren was more in danger of regarding his handsome uncle as a hero. Jonas had fallen between the stools, so to speak, and found it wasn't so bad, sitting there on the ground. He got to live on Otterøy all year round! Søren could practically see the island now, shimmering between the lines of his book:

"A state of skepticism and suspense may amuse a few inquisitive minds. But the practice of superstition is so congenial to the multitude, that if they are forcibly awakened, they still regret the loss of their pleasing vision. Their love of the marvellous and supernatural, their curiosity with regard to future events, and their strong propensity to extend their hopes and fears beyond the limits of the visible world, were the principal causes which favored the establishment of Polytheism. So urgent on the vulgar is the necessity of believing, that the fall of any system of mythology will most

probably be succeeded by the introduction of some other mode of superstition. Some deities of a more recent and fashionable cast might soon have occupied the deserted temples of Jupiter and Apollo, if, in the decisive moment, the wisdom of Providence had not interposed a genuine revelation, fitted to inspire the most rational esteem and conviction, whilst, at the same time, it was adorned with all that could attract the curiosity, the wonder, and the veneration of the people."

The bell rang, and Søren looked up. It was time for Non-Western Cultures class. But it took quite a while for Otterøy to drain out of his eyes. He reached down to gather courage, as if from Yip, Grandma's domineering little dog, while Yap, her shaggy friend, came trundling over and laid his paws in Søren's lap. He looked so certain of his sins, so doubtful of his salvation! If only Søren could have felt his tongue.

Dogs never watched TV. They couldn't even see it, really. Their stupidity, being wordless, resembled wisdom. Perhaps it was. They never disagreed with you about books or music. Just by virtue of existing, they seemed to confirm everything you believed to be true. Each summer, they were more or less the same, like Grandma. Probably, they'd remain unchanged until the summer they were gone. Søren was pretty sure his family's deaths would happen while he was at school, learning to tolerate Islam.

If only there were something *to* tolerate in the video Ms. Walstrøm put on. Søren had seen it at least twice before; a harmless revue of dance and song, it wrapped Muslim "superstition" in art's soft *as if*: "the possibility of genuine revelation," implied in the title, *People of the Book*, was never otherwise allowed to exist. While Christianity, a white man's scam, was granted some of the dignity of the diabolical, Islam, for educated Norwegians, was nothing more than

exotic clothing on the usual democratic gods. Non-Western Cultures amounted to a dance of the seven veils with a breathtakingly prudish reveal. One was taught to celebrate people's differences, as long as they didn't actually mean anything. Søren was assured of equal treatment, regardless of the characteristics of his body, as long as he abided by a strict conformity of soul.

By the time the credits rolled, there seemed to be no more difference between Norway and Turkey than between pickled herring and shish kebab. Hanne, swinging her magnificent blonde braids, remarked that she wouldn't mind wearing hijab, if only to save herself the trouble of washing her hair. Her friends seemed impressed.

In fact, Søren sympathized with Islam—but only the kind that could inspire enough hate—or love—to make you turn yourself into a bomb.

CHAPTER V
CYNTHIA AND THE IMPURE SUBSTANCE

THERE was an impure substance covering every surface at school. It was sooty and green, a cousin of dirt, but more closely related to butterflies. It came off on your hands, and stayed on your clothes even after they'd been washed. Disturbingly, it had no smell. Whenever Søren had time, he'd use his sleeves to open doors. But there was usually someone hurrying up behind, ready to get mad—or even push.

Søren hated it when people got mad at him. He probably hated it even more than most people do. He would have chosen the ability to turn invisible over any superpower except flight. Almost every night, he had nightmares about people getting mad at him. It was never clear what for. It didn't matter. The angry people were always men, played by rolling hills and bassoons. In real life, however, they were

usually girls, played only by themselves. They were angry because Søren wanted to be their friend.

At first, then, surprise was the better half of his delight when Cynthia began to speak to him. She gave no warning; the words were just there, and they made all the difference—in English, of course, which was perhaps why they sounded strangely familiar, like Cynthia herself, instead of familiarly strange, like most Norwegian children when they tried to speak. It felt as if some 19th century novel, a trusted friend, had stepped out of its covers, a little obscenely, and it crossed Søren's mind, as he watched, more than listened, to Cynthia speak, that the English were known for saying horrible things.

Yes, she was discussing books—real ones. He'd hardly known this was possible for a person his age. The common ground of J. K. Rowling led up towards poems they'd both memorized: Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats. Clearing the mists of Innisfree, they paused to admire the view atop Austen, Dickens, Trollope… Søren was sure the wind, now thrilling, would soon blow him off. When would Cynthia say the Norwegian thing?

But she said nothing even as, with a sense of Earth meeting in a circle far below, they entered the temple of George Eliot, and Mother brought in lunch on a tray, trying to look as if she did this all the time. There were sandwiches with olive eyes, grapes in a glass of water, prunes, an English brand of cakes, still in their cellophane—"Objectively bad," Mother apologized, "in the sense that God would not like them. But they must be perfect for children."

And she was right! Søren was so delighted, under the influence of imperishable cream, he had trouble meeting Cynthia's eyes. It would have been enough just to *mention Middlemarch* without getting kicked in the face! Yet, bending

to pick up her fork, Søren had tapped Cynthia squarely on the knee—or where Norwegian kneecaps tended to be—and she'd said nothing about chauvinism, patriarchy, privilege… In fact, she'd even pronounced *chivalry* without scare quotes. Apparently, she'd never learned which words summoned evil ghosts.

At first, Søren blamed British schools, free from E. U. rules. But, of course, it turned out she'd done most of her reading at home. Still, it helped that she could get any book she wanted from the library, whereas Søren had to stick to Grandma's shelves—or seedy .ru sites—if he wished to avoid the bowdlerized Norwegian editions, whose forewords read like "House Condemned" signs.

Yet even Cynthia wouldn't have been so garrulous—or pale—Søren believed, if there hadn't been *something* covert in the pleasure she took, sharing her treasure with him. Perhaps he was its only secret sharer—besides her mom. Probably, he made too many assumptions about her mom. But Cynthia seemed too good to be true: both excessive and insufficient as an explanation for herself. And she didn't stop at *Middlemarch*; she'd read *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, Daniel Deronda, Romola*…

Søren spent the next few weeks rereading them all.

"*Romola* is an odd favorite book for a teenage boy," Mother said admiringly, oddness being the one flaw she'd ordinarily never point out.

Perhaps it wasn't really Søren's favorite. He felt the hairdressing scenes *were* taking place onstage, but that didn't make them seem less real; it just made him realize how stagey a city ought to be, and resent Moss a little more.

Cynthia's favorite part was Romola's dad: how important his scholarship seemed. As far as Søren could remember, the library scenes had mostly taken place off-page. But wasn't

that where all a book's best parts occurred? It was the life the Moomins led *after* you'd closed the book that made you sickest at heart…

He got the impression that in Cynthia's own family, the glamorous promise of her surname went largely unfulfilled. She had a mother, of course, the Source of Books. But her *dad*… In general, he seemed to think too many things were worth the price, as long as it was high. Cynthia glittered, from invisibraces to studded boots. Opening presents seemed to be the happiest time she and her father shared. And what, besides vulgarity, could have brought a software engineer, able to choose his place of work, to the country where cost of living was highest? He was perhaps the only expat, rather than immigrant, in the land.

Yet this man had given Cynthia half her DNA, presumably—half her burnished voice, muscular grace, and inborn habit of success. For there were right and wrong ways of making mistakes, and the right ways, like the titles on her bookshelf, or the color of her eyes, seemed to have been chosen for Cynthia before she was even born. Although she rarely practiced, her knack for playing wrong notes well had made her the only one of Mother's students, thus far, to escape being "pruned."

You'd have thought Mother couldn't afford to be choosy—despite six years at conservatory, she had no degree—yet perhaps choosy was the one thing she could afford to be. Expensive, too, which must have been why Cynthia's father thought she was good.

And how Cynthia could sing! Sight singing lay at the heart of Mother's method: you had to prove you could actually read music, not just mechanically map notes to keys. Perhaps it was Cynthia's preliminary sing-throughs, quietly abashed by their own perfection, that made the piano strings,

whatever she might do to them next, still seem to glow. In fact, anything that vibrated—not just his eardrums, but the hair on Søren's head—seemed reluctant to let Cynthia's overtones go. He wished she were taking singing lessons instead. Or would training spoil her gift?

Knowledge was an obstacle, after a point. You stopped being able to see the thing itself, and instead found yourself staring at the more or less ugly things you'd learned to say around it. In this way, literary scholarship obscured literature, and theology obscured God. It was a bit like building a museum, then charging yourself admission.

But perhaps some obstruction helped—a hand to screen the candle. Perhaps light was increased more by the presence of windows than the absence of walls. Didn't it seem likely that, if you built a lovely enough cathedral, with long enough halls, even if it were to sit empty for a thousand years, one lonely night, as the pilgrims drew near, the glass would begin to shine, and smoke rise?

It was taking Mother an awfully long time to explain why you could hear more than one sound at the same time.

"Wouldn't you need a different eardrum," Cynthia objected, "for every pitch?"

Mother drew composite waveforms on a sheet of note paper, but Søren couldn't translate her pictures into anything relevant to his experience of sound. How *was* it that speakers could play every instrument in the orchestra, without containing some equivalent of a tiny orchestra inside? It's not that he expected every TV to contain a midget theater, but, well—that would be nice.

Listening to contrapuntal music, Søren found he could follow only one melody at a time. Yet he was aware of all the others, as if someone were listening and reporting back to him. But if so, who?

After the lesson, Mother kept practicing, to show Cynthia how, and give Søren time for a chat.

"I like the part where she drowns her father," Cynthia whispered, in reference to *Daniel Deronda.*

Søren had to sit closer in order to hear.

"Isn't he actually her husband?"

"Yes, but when I'm reading I always like to think of him as her father."

"Oh," Søren said. "Are your parents divorced?"

Cynthia smiled. Even her teeth were freckled—probably the reflection, in her braces, of her hair.

"I only ask because my father's dead," Søren added.

Of course, he'd had conversations before. But Eskild was a boy, and Mother didn't listen, and Grandma had more important things to worry about. Whatever was happening between him and Cynthia now seemed to deserve a whole new word. She was unrelated to him, yet seemed to wish him no ill. He didn't say much, but every word left more room inside him for happiness to appear. He was afraid—could you still be a person with nothing in reserve? Yet he continued to let himself go. He wanted Cynthia to have it all.

When she moved back to England, however, he remained standing in the hall, holding her parting gift, an English edition of *Romola,* while her father's laughter—or was it her own?—echoed up the stairs. He realized how glad she must have been to go—how suffocating Norway must have seemed.

Her last remark had apparently been aimed at every Norwegian except for him:

"It's so easy to imagine good things about people when they're speaking a foreign language."

She'd never really mastered Norwegian, thank heaven.

He was so jealous of her voice!

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERY OF NIELS GADE

SØREN KNEW it was a mistake to bring *Romola* to school. But, like most mistakes, this one happened because he couldn't help making it. *Romola* insisted on coming. Although he kept her in his binder, except at lunch, he could almost hear her murmur: *You shall not die of loneliness today!*

The book itself was no first edition, but it contained the original text, and smelled of citrus, muffins, blood—much like Cynthia's ancestral home, perhaps. Since his own life might continue for decades, he'd put off rereading *Romola* as long as possible, saving up the pleasure. He strongly suspected Cynthia was going to have been his only nonrelative friend.

As comfort object and talisman, her gift worked even better than Grandma's. Being in English, it was a passport to an even more distant world. Sadly, Eliot had not written *Romola* in medieval Italian—a slight failure of historical

research on her part, it seemed. Last year, Søren had pursued his Dante studies all the way to paradise, and would have enjoyed an excuse to go even further. His only lasting criticism of *Romola*, in fact, was that it seemed slightly afraid of "going over its readers' heads." But wasn't the purpose of reading to be immersed—ultimately, even, drowned? One day, the book would close so tight around you, when you looked up, at last, you'd see only heaven, having lost hold of your loathsome self for good.

Of course, fire would be even better than water, when it came to baptism. How Mother would have loved to hold a Burning of the Vanities in Moss! True, compared to Savonarola, she'd have burned the opposite things. But the tower of smoke would have been the same: a prayer that could not go unheard. ("A road," Søren could imagine her saying, "to transport a goat to God.")

It seemed the departure of her last student had strengthened Mother's plans to become a personality in the world of Norwegian classical radio. This world was rapidly becoming less crowded, yet Søren did not think there would ever be enough room for Mother. Her audition tape was a podcast, ostensibly suspenseful, called "The Mystery of Niels Gade." Why had he been "forgotten"? She gathered music from Youtube, but every time Søren heard something he liked, it turned out to have been written by Grieg, Mendelssohn, or Brahms. Perhaps *that*, Søren did not suggest, was the reason for Gade's neglect.

Mother relied heavily on primary documents; this afternoon, she let Clara Schumann do most of the talking. Søren enjoyed the way her letters sounded, read aloud. He wished his mother would channel Clara Schumann more often. It disappointed him to think that even Mother might be afraid of being forgotten. Of course, she would continue

to live inside her children, as long as they might stick around. But the prospect of her having any grandchildren seemed remote…

Would her own music survive her? Would Mother, in some posthumous flowering, reveal herself as the Emily Dickinson of the piano, whom in retrospect it seemed amazing no musical family in Europe or America had ever quite produced? Søren didn't think so. Whenever he came home to find her composing at the kitchen table, he was happy to avoid her, as she wished. She hated for anyone to hear her music. Søren couldn't read it, but sometimes she'd sound it out at the piano when she thought no one was around. The only thing these angular, tinkling passages made clear was that composing made Mother miserable. But to Søren, true art seemed inseparable from joy.

Sometimes, he'd stand outside her door at night, listening to her talk:

"If your hearing were to deteriorate to the point where you couldn't listen to audiobooks or podcasts while you did chores, you could always just play imagination games, or memorize poetry, instead, referring now and then to your computer, or bits of paper posted on the walls. Or you could write stories or compose music in your head. You don't really need *any* of your senses in order to be able to make your mind a pleasant—and *good*—place to live. You just need enough freedom from pain to be able to think. And if you don't have that, you'll probably have enough drugs to take away both thought and pain… And if you lost both hearing and sight, how fun it would be to learn Braille!"

Mother brought up locked-in syndrome often enough for Søren to recognize it as a thoroughbass to her thought. It was the ultimate test of whether you were a good person: a good person wouldn't mind being locked in.

"What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut with diamonds?" she said. "Or to be smothered with Cassia? Or shot to death with pearls? Ah—*il est assez temps d'être malheureux quand absolument, et pour des causes trop puissantes, il faut l'être*!"

In the darkness, Søren agreed with her that hell was both other people *and* oneself.

"I'm younger than I look, increasingly…" she sighed.

Rather, heaven was to lose oneself in other people's books…

Yet most people didn't seem to mind living in hell. Perhaps they *were* good, after all—if they didn't mind being "locked in."

"I've always liked the idea of a flowered hat floating on a lily pool," Mother mumbled. "People thinking there is an unhappy woman underneath…"

Soon, she'd be talking in her sleep.

CHAPTER VII
PIANO LESSONS

NOW THAT Mother had more time, and Søren had turned fifteen—"far too old ever to master an instrument"—when he asked for piano lessons, she finally said yes. At first, they were delicious, though not quite like he'd dreamed. It seemed as if he'd spent the last ten years just trying to keep his hands off the keys. He resolved to practice enough, no matter how much that might turn out to be. Before his first lesson, he taught himself to play "Frère Jacques" with one finger, starting on middle C.

But, by the end of the first week, he couldn't keep himself on that stool, perched at such a painful three-way disjuncture between himself, the music, and the keys, for more than thirty minutes at a time. Still, there was something rewarding about the cycles of discipline and relief, and *he* thought he was learning fast.

At the beginning of April, however, a timer seemed to go

off in Mother's head. She didn't literally cross his name out of her book, but the way she smiled, delivering the news—it reminded him of the way she always did her crossword puzzles in ink. At last, he knew what it was like to be fired by his mom! He couldn't blame himself. In fact, he partly shared her relief. It seemed as if she'd been planning this the whole time, and would have just been irritated by any display of talent or diligence that might have made her put it off.

If only he'd been able to sing!

She treated Søren with exceptional kindness for the next few days. She complimented his eyes. She organized a picnic in the backyard, but cancelled it when Freja and Kai said they didn't want to come. Perhaps she thought she'd helped Søren escape her own fate; now, he was free to worship music from afar, rather than chaining himself to its altar—a smudgy virgin whose sacrifice would never go up in flame.

Someday, though, he'd show her she'd been wrong. He'd compose an opera, find a cure, or win the Nobel prize for an autobiographical body of work in which she was the antiheroic star…

Having no more students seemed to take a great weight off her mind. After updating her website and pinning an ad to a bulletin board—Søren noticed her prices had gone way up—she seemed to feel she had done her best to find a job. He heard her talking on speakerphone with Grandma about how unmusical people were in Moss.

"You are a materialist, aren't you?" Grandma asked.

"Eh, my dear soul!" Mother replied, "What is there to be a materialist about?"

She was resting her forearms in a bowl, and seemed very happy—as usual after she'd practiced too much.

"That was your grandma, talking about money," Mother said. She was always proud to have been caught talking on

the phone.

"What did she say?" Søren asked.

"That we don't have much." Mother smiled.

Søren knew their poverty was complex—genteel. The money wasn't so much missing as "all tied up." Lately, Grandma had done quite well, investing in American films. "If something fills you with horror," she advised, "you can assume it will sell." Her chain of German breakfast restaurants, however—*Gluten Morgen!*—was going to hell.

Søren expected Mother now to devote more time to composing. But she didn't. She left "The Mystery of Niels Gade" unsolved, and stopped listening to public radio altogether. ("There should be no public funding for 'the arts,'" she said. "Any art worth doing, either people will be willing to pay for it, or do it without getting paid.")

She read a lot, practiced her usual six hours, took long walks…and seemed content. Søren knew it couldn't last. At conservatory, Mother had kept changing her focus on the eve of her degree, hoping she would prove more talented at something else. But there were just too many people, and not enough talent—perhaps not even enough instruments—to go around.

"Be like Thomas Nagel," she suggested, "the first one to ask, in a sufficiently intelligent way, something as fundamental as whether a human can truly imagine what it's like to be a bat."

Søren appreciated that she kept proposing cures for Cynthia being gone. And he was always relieved when his mother's expectations for him took a more definite form. Concert pianist he might never be; but anyone might become a philosopher… All you really needed was a place to read. Sometimes, philosophy could even be done at school:

"What is the purpose of literature?" the substitute had

written on the board. If Ms. Lund had been there to grade him, Søren would have written about literature's duty to promote empathy and share the experience of minority groups.

Mother would have said, simply, "The purpose of literature is to be read." For her, education was not for the benefit of the student, but for the benefit of knowledge. Culture was a virus, far more valuable than its host.

But a virus didn't *want* anything, and literature certainly did. It struck Søren, for the first time, that "art for art's sake" was more a question than an answer. Of course, art had to be escapist; otherwise it wasn't art. But where to escape to? It was clear enough what *from*…

Grandma believed the purpose of literature was "to justify the ways of God to men," and this could hardly be done without reference to heaven. But even the most disenchanted books—say, *Don Quixote,* or *Madame Bovary*—convinced Søren that Earth was not his home. Perhaps *especially* these books. Probably Camões was right: chivalry was less about the dragon than the knight. Poetry was to "keep before the nation's memory / those deeds which deserve eternal glory": not just the Trojan War, but the apostles' Acts—and their children, the Crusades!

The connection between Søren's ideas made itself felt so strongly, he didn't have time to write it down. He wrote so fast, he kept smearing his ink: "The purpose of myth is not to be true, but to inspire true belief. God is in physics, but not of it, as a person is in his body, a painting in its pigments, a melody in its pitches, a poem in its words…" But what was the meaning of the word *in*? "Art gives the world a face," Søren began. "No—art looks the world in its face." And the main thing about a face was that when you looked at it, it looked back. Not as a mirror looks back, frozen and alone,

but cunningly, and full of judgment. It was proof of the immortal soul, though not necessarily your own. "In conclusion, the purpose of literature is to teach us the meaning of love." He reread this sentence several times—it sounded suspiciously like something Ms. Lund might say. But it didn't feel like a lie.

He missed Eskild so much! Afternoon Mingle had arrived, but the weather was so nice, Søren walked right past the boys' room and went to read outside. There was a spot between a tree and the parking lot that almost felt like home.

For as long as possible, he tried to ignore the fact that Hanne was approaching. She'd already seen his book, so he'd just look guilty if he tried to hide it. He kept on pretending to read. The gnats tickled his ears, but he couldn't spare a hand to brush them away. He held on tightly to his invisibility until it was torn away. By the time he looked up, he could smell Hanne's breath, and see her strawberry gumline as she asked:

"Whatcha reading?"

That question! He'd managed to avoid it for years. But, now, his dread was mixed with hope—for another Cynthia, even in this improbable form.

He showed Hanne his book and she took it, her smile widening at the author's name: she knew a dead white male when she saw one, even in English. She sat on the curb and took out her pen. Now and then, she looked up, checking Søren's reaction. She seemed dissatisfied. Her drawing hadn't turned out very well.

"Well, I'm going to the library to return a book," she said, and went.

After a psychologically appropriate interval, Søren closed his mouth. Even if he'd been capable of asking a teacher for help, he'd have just ended up getting in trouble, and his book

would have ended up in the same place.

Technically, *Romola* would still be available to him there—perhaps sitting next to Mother's *Middlemarch*. He could read it for up to two hours at a time, in that plexiglass booth, eerily lit to make the reader of antidemocratic literature visible to the public. And there actually *was* a public, since most of the "space" had been converted into a computer lab.

Really, it didn't matter if Hanne told on him. He'd done nothing illegal, unless you could convict him of "public display." Even then, the only punishment was to have the offensive material taken away…

He hoped at least they'd put an official sticker over Hanne's mess.

"You're not a strong person, Søren," his mother said that night. "It isn't in your blood. But you must never let people try to make you feel proud of that fact. You must find heroes with muscles to worship: Heracles, Napoleon, Brunhilde…"

He appreciated her attempt to comfort him. But Søren's heroes were Dido, Rusalka, Fanny Price… The only way he could imagine Christ was shamefaced, hanging on the cross.

And he didn't think Mother knew quite all that was in his blood. In a way, it was a blessing, having a dad with such vague outlines. Søren felt certain that something superhuman had been involved in his conception. Not a horned demigod; still less a dove… But why did he feel such a kinship with nature? Everyone loved nature, of course; it was required. But did everyone, seeing lightning, feel such a piercing sensation of home?

It struck Søren that he'd never called Cynthia by name. In real life, people's names usually seemed out of place. They belonged on the printed page, where they stood in for a face.

But Cynthia's name looked nothing like her face. She'd

said she would write, which flattered Søren, but gave him nothing to look forward to. He felt certain that this year in Moss would be his last. He didn't think he was going to *die*, exactly, though Freja's condition kept this possibility tantalizingly alive. Instead, he was counting on finding a subtler alternative to going back to school. Certain children lived on Otterøy all year round… What would Søren have to do to join them? Kick, or scream, or cry? He hoped it would just come down to persuading Grandma, or finding a suitable place to hide.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RETURN OF MS. LUND

THE other thing Cynthia had given him was a tube of mascara. She'd been about to throw it away—"It makes my eyes look red"—when she'd noticed the look in Søren's. "I'll show you how to put it on," she offered.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'd rather do it alone."

He'd hoped the mascara would help him disappear, which was more reasonable than it sounds: camouflage was the most convenient way to hide, and if he were ever to earn Norwegian sympathy, he knew, it would be by virtue of being "queer."

But he put it on all wrong: not as ornament, the transparent desire to please, but as a lie, in order to seduce, very subtly at the tips. He didn't want the others to think he was bending gender through mascara; he wanted them to believe his eyelashes really *were* that long. As if they hadn't known him since he was three…

Yes, it really seemed as if they hadn't known him since he was three. Nobody mentioned his eyelashes, even though they must have noticed, and despised, them. For a while, their silence allowed Søren to believe his plan had worked. Then Ms. Lund returned. The first thing she said was,

"Søren! What fabulous eyelashes! Isn't it wonderful when a person has the courage to defy gender norms?"

Several students looked as if their earrings or crew cuts had been unfairly passed over. One boy growled, for he identified as a bear.

Ms. Lund turned a circle in her chair. She hadn't changed a single diaper, she said, since her partner had taken his new parent leave at the same time. While he bottle-fed the baby, she caught up on American TV. She hoped to give her offspring an early taste for diversity, and mentioned *RuPaul's Drag Race,* presumably in honor of Søren.

But when the bear asked Ms. Lund what she thought about the latest "elimination," her expression soured—perhaps she hadn't actually watched the show? "It was shocking," she said, and assigned everyone to write an essay on the book they'd most recently read.

Søren couldn't share the others' groan. An essay was almost as good as a private room, although there was a pretty good chance Ms. Lund would come in. So he wrote about Aliyah and her strangely unsuspenseful adventures in Norwegian politics. Despite the rich white men who tried to keep her down, sprinkling racist pamphlets from their helicopters, or puncturing the tires of her beat-up car on the morning of her big speech, Aliyah's ultimate triumph was never in doubt. The adoring acclamation of the Norwegian people was an end in itself: "We are not bigots here!" was the victorious subtext to their shout. By means of signing a few bills, she ended poverty, war, and global warming. The book

left matters there. A Muslim woman of color was sitting in Norway's big chair, and the world had nothing left to worry about.

But, in Søren's mind, Aliyah worried. Gasping for air, she clambered to the edge of her author's word stew, and climbed out. Søren provided her with a fancy hotel room, where she took a hot shower, wrapped herself in clean towels, and sat up in bed, thinking:

In Aliyah's world, Europe had become one country. College was free. Islam had accepted a privileged position in the secular world, at no greater cost than admitting it didn't really believe in God. The racists had been silenced, the rich stripped of their wealth. The *kulturmän* and other purveyors of tradition had withered under their full dose of public shame. The seas were cooling, the birthrate falling, and euthanasia was universally available to soothe whatever suffering still lay beyond science's reach…

In short, all the world's *real* problems had been solved. Now, there was nothing to worry about but the *unreal* ones. They rose before her in satiric majuscule: all those Big Questions, such as "Why?", or "Why not commit suicide?", moaning like the ghosts of the dead white men who'd asked, and even tried to answer, them at such tedious, elitist, privileged, arrogant, sexist, racist, bigoted, colonial, imperialist, patriarchal, bourgeois, nationalistic, religious, transcendental, aristocratic, absolutist, Eurocentric, capitalist, reactionary, fascist, sentimental, nostalgic, or conservative length.

Aliyah's first act the next morning was to request access to the antidemocratic repository at the National Library. The librarian gave her an odd look, but could hardly refuse. There was a strange hissing as the doors opened (in Søren's mind, Nasjonalbiblioteket seemed to have been converted into a

spaceship.) At first, Aliyah was repulsed by the smell. She'd heard about the dangers of mold, and felt lightheaded as she walked up and down, stroking the occasional spine, or tipping a volume halfway out. Finally, she chose a big red book, with lots of gold, and began to read:

"In the beginning…"

Søren felt himself slipping into a pastiche of Genesis. Siding smugly, as usual, with the snake, he wondered if he were trying to please Ms. Lund—contemporary Norway was hardly Eden; and if knowledge *were* corrupting, then it *ought* to be shunned—when he realized she was standing over him, saying "Time's up."

He reluctantly let his paper go. She smoothed it, skimmed it, and began to read. It took her longer than he'd expected. She sat on a neighboring desk, her superior smiles alternating with respectful frowns, until the other students began to rumble, confused by what increasingly seemed like a good thing for Søren.

"Why don't you finish this on your own time?" Ms. Lund said, handing it back. She didn't suggest he consider a career in academia—obviously, there wouldn't be room for both him and Hanne there. But she did say, "There's a lot more going on in there than you'd think." By *there*, she apparently meant Søren's head.

"Thanks," he said, deeply thrilled. It felt like the first time he'd heard *Rusalka*: as if all the reasons he'd thought he was unhappy were not entirely wrong. Or even as if Grandma, Mother, and Uncle Jonas were not entirely right? At the moment, it seemed worthwhile to abandon any, or all, of his most precious beliefs in order to make Ms. Lund smile.

But, as she walked away, he began to feel queasy about having ceded so much ground. Why, for instance, should Aliyah have waited so long to visit the library? Wasn't life too

short to solve the little problems *first*?

"Does anyone else want to share their essay?" Ms. Lund asked, glancing at the clock. No one raised "their" hand. But it seemed Ms. Lund had a plan. "I wasn't just being mean, asking you to write about a book…" she said. The class giggled. "Now, I'm going to ask you to write another essay—this time, about the last *movie* you watched. Then we'll discuss how much easier and more fun that was. I think you'll find you have a lot more to say!"

The class set to work, almost cheerfully this time. Ms. Lund sat behind the pile of papers the substitute had left her. She kept nudging them, in a surreptitious way, until they fell into the trash. She smiled. She clipped her nails. After a while, she reached into her purse and pulled out a paperback. The author's name was embossed in gold.

Her behavior was much more interesting than Søren's own essay, about class and gender in *Lady and the Tramp*. The way movies, even the best of them, tried to grab your attention—as opposed to the way books quietly offered themselves up—seemed so *rude*… As Hanne walked up to turn in her essay, she kicked the leg of his desk, jolting his pen. Some of the other students followed her example. But it was an old trick, and he could work around it.

This time, Ms. Lund found plenty of volunteers to read their work.

Jack had written about *The Little Mermaid* cartoon. With minimal prompting, he identified it as a parable of patriarchal oppression.

Søren was thinking how much better Andersen's story was when he heard Ms. Lund say, in response to Hanne's essay on the latest film of *Pride and Prejudice,* "I hope you're not one of those people who 'prefers the book'?"

"No!" Hanne said, and everyone laughed.

Søren, however, was pleasantly surprised by the implication that Ms. Lund—and even Hanne, perhaps—*had* read the book. It almost sounded as if the whole class even knew Jane Austen existed!

He was always eager to believe the world's ugliness was just a reflection of his own warped mind. How much easier it would be to live as a monster in a world of humans—who might treat one humanely, after all—than as the only human in a world of monsters! In the first case, only one magical transformation would be required. It might not even hurt. But in the second, a holy fire would have to sweep the world. Søren's skin prickled at the thought.

The next morning, summer seemed already to have arrived. The breeze felt like kindness itself, and Søren chatted with Freja and Kai as they walked. It seemed as if everything were allowed. He'd brought *Out of Africa* to school. His annual rereading was long overdue. Of course, it might as well have been *Tintin in the Congo,* he knew. But he only intended to read it in the bathroom, during lunch. And maybe in Ms. Lund's class… She'd been so nice about Aliyah! Maybe, if he were lucky, she'd smile at him again, and tell him he ought to "finish that on his own time"…

Otterøy was everywhere today, shimmering between the lines. During lunch, a butterfly even flew into the boys' room and landed on his head. During Language Arts, he made short work of his essay on how *To Kill a Mockingbird* failed adequately to show that racism was wrong, then got Dinesen out and began to read—a little demonstratively perhaps. When he noticed Ms. Lund standing over him, he smiled and tilted the cover towards her.

If there'd been hypocrisy in his smile, there was none at all in Ms. Lund's reply. Her anger seemed so natural, it reminded him of Mother.

"This," she paused for breath, "is not an acceptable thing for you to read." She held the book up for the class to see, giving Søren time to make eye contact with Dinesen's sad portrait on the back.

I had a farm, it seemed to say, *at the foot of the Ngong Hills*…

"I'm going to have to report this to the principal," Ms. Lund said.

As soon as she left, the class began to buzz. Watching himself, Søren shared their excitement, even though he couldn't understand their words. What the Dinesen Affair lacked in glamor—compared to, say, the Pocketknife Fight—it supplied with a sense of just desserts. The school creep, at last, had been caught with a copy of *Mein Kampf* in his hands!

When at last she returned, Ms. Lund said nothing. But, later in the day, the principal gave a speech over the intercom—"in light of recent events"—to remind the students of their shared Norwegian values. Every person and every culture, he said, sounding rather tired, had equal worth. We shouldn't let the strong oppress the weak. Art's special power, and responsibility, was to teach empathy. (For a moment, Søren had thought he was going to say "compassion.")

For the rest of the term, Søren's invisibility disappeared. He'd thought he knew the difference between being passively and actively ignored. But it turned out there were more than two kinds of everything. Some teachers, probably with kind intentions, even began to call on him during class. Mrs. Walstrøm once even addressed a question to "Mr. Wistling," then blushed at her *faux pas*.

Out of Africa felt strangely heavy, being gone. Søren was pretty sure Grandma would give him another copy if he told her how he'd lost it. But, on Otterøy, somehow, it was

impossible to mention school.

In the past, he'd often pretended to be sick, aided by the fever and headache he believed were more the result of unhappiness than germs. It was delightful to stay at home and listen to Mother practice all day, and he got a lot of reading done. But he felt bad, faking illness in front of Freja. And he didn't want officials with an interest in his well-being to get in touch with his mom.

So, as the weather stayed nice, Søren spent his days in the park, always walking: he felt so guilty whenever he sat, or even stood still, it became easier, in the end, just to wash off his mascara and go back to school.

Everything seemed strangely normal there. Perhaps the smell of the bathroom was a little stronger. He hoped it wouldn't seep into his books. He'd brought Tove Jansson for comfort, but wisely kept her out of sight. Those trolls were awfully bourgeois… Instead of reading, he wrote out poems that reminded him of Otterøy. What poem didn't, really?

The trouble was, after repeating something often enough, you began to doubt if it were true. Who knew, after nine whole months, if Eskild would even still be his friend? Unlike Grandma, or her dogs, Eskild had always changed each summer. Always for the better, it was true; but that only made things worse. Soon, Eskild would be an adult, and it seemed impossible that Søren would ever catch up.

Mother had, or had had, one friend. They'd used to play violin sonatas together. Then the friend had gotten married and moved to Spain. What Mother had said about her most recently was,

"I can congratulate Natasha on her marriage to a woman the same way I'd congratulate a friend on winning a Grammy Award. I believe that homosexual marriage, like popular

music, is deeply wrong, a way of celebrating the most serious problems our culture has. But my congratulations are still sincere, for I recognize that a good thing has happened in the smaller context of my friend's own life."

Søren often wondered where the smaller context of his own life ended, and the larger context of human culture began.

Part II

Molde

CHAPTER IX

MRS. DAY-AND-NIGHT

IT WAS the first day of summer, a disappointment Søren was already willing to acknowledge as his fault. Eskild stopped to knock the clock off a dandelion, then followed its seeds on toward the sea. There was nothing to say about Freja's doom, and Søren plodded along five steps behind, waiting for the moment to give his friend the Thing—a boat, he supposed, but also something new, too clever for a name. He'd carved it with the knife he was not allowed to own, and buried the shavings in the bathroom trash back home. He'd tried it in the tub and knew the Thing would float, if only upside down.

A gull swooped and Eskild raised his hand in salute.

Was now the time? Or now, as Eskild hurled a rock into the sea? The splash seemed to take place inside Søren. The surf washed up over his feet. Bending down to roll up his pants, he squeezed the Thing out of his pocket. It nosed around Eskild's calves, then sailed away. But Eskild didn't

look, and Søren said nothing. Soon, the Thing was out of reach.

The wind began to sing. Shivering, Søren picked his way across the rocks. He dried his feet off with his socks. A gust made him totter as he pulled them on. It smelled like Grandma's buns were almost done.

"I'm going in," he said.

"OK," Eskild said. "I'm coming."

But it took him a while to turn around—long enough for Søren to wonder if he'd been crying.

They walked in silence up to Grandma's house. Søren let his shoulder knock against Eskild's once, but was careful not to do it again.

"What did you say?" Eskild said.

Apparently, the wind had sounded a lot like Søren.

"Nothing. I've got a present for you."

"Oh?" Eskild said.

"It's inside," Søren said, remembering the Thing was gone. He'd have to find another, fast.

Did he have anything good enough for Eskild?

His knife?

Yes, Eskild would like that.

Holding the door open, Søren looked back at the sea. The waves were full of splintered light. But perhaps there was one splinter more purposeful than the rest…

"Don't let the flies in," he told himself, and let the door bang shut. "Don't let the door bang shut," he said, and it bounced open again, sticking on the warped front step.

Grandma's house probably smelled the same all summer long, but you only really noticed it on the first day, when your nose was still full of school-year things. Was it just the varnish peeling off the floor that filled Søren with such joy, the resin in the wallpaper, or the seawater drying in the shoes

piled by the door? Was there something in the mold, which rose and sank across the ceiling, like faces from a hidden world?

Søren believed there was.

Passing through the cavernous living room, following the smell of Grandma's buns, Søren stopped to stroke the stuffed squirrel, John, and play three notes on the player piano. Like Grandma, it spoke the Otterøy dialect.

The kitchen had yellow wallpaper and ceiling lamps with stained-glass suns. A sense of fever filled the room, but pleasantly, like a tame dragon curled up in the corner, piping fire up the blue tile stove. Søren hugged it, tracing the grout with his fingers, pressing his cheek into the glaze.

With red-stamped face, he turned to Grandma.

"Kitsch shows you save your brain for more important things," her apron read. It had a border of cherubim and edelweiss. Somehow, her manner of wearing them made all Uncle Jonas' clothes seem sad.

Would she say hello? Søren wondered. To be safe, he beat her to it.

"How was your day?" he added.

"Not bad." Grandma looked at him uncertainly. It always took them a while to get used to each other at the beginning of each summer. "Do you want to lick the spoon?" she said.

Søren did. He wanted a bun, too, but was afraid to ask. Sooner or later Grandma would have to start dispensing them. They couldn't *all* be for Freja… He squeezed himself behind the huge table, stretching his legs against the beam. They were still sore from the long ride that morning.

It had seemed so exciting, after nine months apart, to be allowed to drive to Otterøy with Eskild's family! While Mother had gone the long way through Molde, picking up groceries, medicine, and things, Aunt Siv had taken the

mountain road, playing Raffi's animal songs with the windows down. Everyone sang—or rather, she and Søren did, louder and louder, while Eskild frowned and Mag had finally thrown up. Aunt Siv stopped by a tarn and carried Mag around the shore, murmuring things Søren wished he could hear. Eskild had thrown a rock in the water there, too—it seemed to be the gesture of the day.

"Where's Mag?" Søren asked. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been running away. But she never stayed gone for long.

"Upstairs with Jonas," Grandma said. "You're welcome to join them." She was always trying to get the boys to play with their uncle. But Søren was skeptical. Much as he enjoyed being read to, speaking French, or sharing observations like "Did you know a sperm whale's eyes are the size of bowling balls?", he felt like an intruder in that room. Jonas, obviously, was afraid of him.

Yip, the little dog, started barking, and charged up the driveway. Yap, the big one, woke himself with a deep woof, and looked around in surprise. Knocking the hollyhocks with his tail, he lumbered out of the garden, guessing the good news even before Yip had changed her tune from fury to delight, and came scampering down the hill, herding Mother's car home.

Mother looked like a tragic actress, getting out. She tried to take Freja's bag, but Freja hoisted it away. Freja looked redder than usual, against the sky.

Kai slipped past them like a cat. The dogs didn't need to knock him down in order to reach his face, but they did so anyway.

Søren watched them play. It helped him ignore Freja and Eskild: that clumsy hug and helpless smile—if only Søren had waited to arrive with his own family, such things might have seemed to be for him!

"Did you enjoy the drive?" he asked Kai.

Kai looked back narrowly, then shoved Yip aside.

"I love you," he said, putting his arms around Søren, then ran away before Søren could think of a reply.

He checked to make sure the knife was still in his pocket. He'd forgotten to give it to Eskild. But now did not seem like the right time.

"You've grown!" Freja was saying, like she was Eskild's aunt. "Are you as tall as me now?" They stood back to back.

Mother slammed the trunk. Her forehead was sweaty, eyes blank.

Søren held the screen door open for her.

"I'll unpack the suitcase," he said. "You go take a nap."

"You don't know where things *go*," she said, hauling the suitcase up the stairs. Each thump put Søren in mind of a body.

"You smell like flowers," he said, trying not to feel slighted as her door banged shut.

Jonas' door creaked open, and Mag slipped out.

"They're here," Søren said, redundantly, as she raced by. By the time he'd caught up, she was already murmuring words of love into Freja's jeans.

"It's been such a long time, my little dirty Magazine!" Freja said. She pulled Mag into her lap, lavishing attention on her in a way that seemed meant to impress Eskild. Briefly, her eyes met Søren's. She probably would have hugged him if he'd gone up to her then. But he turned around and went inside.

He couldn't think of anything to do in there but pee. He did it in the little bathroom on the second floor, where there was always a spider if you took the time to look. It had used to be that Søren could not pee in the presence of a spider, whether real or imaginary, so he'd had to go outside. This

had made him feel like the wrong kind of boy.

Afterwards, he watched Mother unpack. He noticed she was taking something unusual out of her suitcase. He hoped it was fireworks. She stuffed it into the nearest drawer, trying to keep it out of sight. As if to distract him, she asked what he wanted to do this summer. As if to calm her suspicions, he said he wanted to find a swallow chick and nurse it back to health.

Perhaps it was candy she'd bought for herself, the shamefully expensive kind? Perhaps it was guilt that made her lay out the sheet music for her concert in Molde and begin discussing the order of the pieces:

"Sad first, don't you think?"

But Freja was laughing downstairs; Søren could actually hear people putting on their shoes. Mother might never show him this favor again—yet he couldn't miss out on an actual adventure, the summer's first.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I have to go."

"Fine," Mother said. "I don't care."

Søren ran downstairs. They hadn't been intending to leave him out, he was sure. They just hadn't noticed he wasn't there.

"If you can't find your socks, you'll just have to go without," Freja was saying, as Mag tiptoed around, carrying her shoes.

The dogs were scratching at the door. Freja let them out, and tossed them the rest of her cinnamon bun.

"Don't let the flies in," Grandma said, but Freja held the door open until Kai, Eskild, and Søren had gone out.

"Are you coming or not?" she said to Jonas, who was standing in the kitchen, holding a pair of purple socks.

"Yes!" Jonas said.

Mag balanced against his leg as she put them on.

"So where are we going?" Jonas asked.

"Nowhere in particular," Freja said loftily, and Søren began to fear she didn't actually have a plan.

"How about Mrs. Dag-og-Nat's house?" Jonas suggested.

"That sounds wonderful!" Mag said.

"Well…" Freja looked around to see if Eskild had an opinion. "Where is it?"

"This way," Jonas said. "I used to go there a lot as a kid. It was so much fun, even though I didn't have friends like you. I was only allowed to steal one thing, as long as I put it back in exactly the same place the next summer. At least, I *think* I was allowed."

Mag held Jonas' hand while they walked. Kai kept running off into the bushes. Freja and Eskild were talking about football, and Søren felt superfluous. He often reached down to scratch Yap's ears or comment on all the plants that did not grow in Moss. Even the ground felt different here, as if set on springs.

Mrs. Dag-og-Nat's house was so big, Søren felt there must be a special reason he'd never seen it before. According to Jonas, Mrs. Dag-og-Nat only stayed here for a few weeks each year. She'd already been old when Jonas was a child. But surely he'd have heard if she had died…

Her family had pillaged a lot more monasteries than most people's. The first Dag-og-Nat had received his name for saving the King's eyes under memorable circumstances involving Wends. Unfortunately, Jonas couldn't remember exactly what they were.

Freja seemed awfully impressed. With the confidence of one returning home, she vaulted the fence around the lawn, and seemed surprised to find the front doors locked.

"Over here!" Jonas called.

The kitchen garden was full of marigolds. The dovecot

had been flung wide open, and the kitchen door was secured on the inside with a hook, but Jonas used a stick to reach in through the gap and flip it up. The stick seemed to have been lying there just for that purpose.

From the ceiling hung a multitude of copper pots. The freezer opened like a coffin, and Søren thought it would be fun to ask someone to lock him in. He'd never seen so much raspberry jam. But Freja was already heading upstairs.

He stumbled until she opened the door at the top, filling the stairwell with stars. The curtains were thick, but the sun found plenty of leaks, and dozens of mirrors gave the impression he was entering a dining room full of ghosts. They bore an uncanny resemblance to his family.

"Meet back here in half an hour," Freja whispered, and for half an hour, they explored, finding delightful things like a giant music box—it played Sibelius' *Karelia Suite*—a lamb suspended in alcohol, and a suit of armor wearing a baseball cap.

When Søren saw a black Volvo in the garage, he ran to warn the others. But they had already found Mrs. Dag-og-Nat herself. It couldn't have been anyone else. She was sitting in a rocking chair by the fire, looking like a long winter's night. Her Kindle provided another source of light.

"Come closer," she said. "I can hardly see you."

Jonas sat by her feet, and she placed her hand on his head, saying something Søren couldn't catch.

"Forty-six," Jonas replied.

Could he really be that old?

Kai foisted the cat out of Mrs. Dag-og-Nat's lap. It flowed past Søren's legs. As Mrs. Dag-og-Nat stroked him, Kai looked back at Søren with glittering eyes.

Søren tried to hide behind Freja. She was staring at Mrs. Dag-og-Nat in a way that must have seemed rude. But, then,

Søren couldn't help staring, too.

Mrs. Dag-og-Nat was all bones. Her skull was like a midday moon, wrapped in clouds. Pearls seemed to hang in the bags under her eyes. But everywhere else was thin and dry. After a sense of normalcy had had time to set in, she picked up her Kindle and began to read:

"My conception was not immaculate, yet no miracle seemed incredible if it happened to me. My grandfather was a fish-cleaner. I bet you wouldn't have guessed that by looking at me! My grandmother was a textile merchant's daughter from Lübeck. Yet she moved in the highest circles. Her own utterances, when she could be induced to make any, were reckoned to be among the most remarkable of her time. She was allowed to do whatever she wanted. What she wanted, oddly enough, was to study mathematics in England. She always said mathematics was the most difficult and splendid of all sciences. Everything in it is valid, and whatever you derive from it is yours for the rest of your life. She might have developed some astonishing new theories, if only she hadn't turned out to be not quite as clever as she'd expected.

"Collection precedes science. To ease her regrets, she went steaming up the coast of Norway, recording folk songs on the same kind of cylinders Bartok would later use, looking for an impoverished son of the nobility to marry. Her greatest shame, you see, was her father's name, Müller—unless it were her mother's: Schulz. In Norway, she took the *nom de voyage* von Ædelskøld, which cured her of her shyness, while her money and charm drew the men to her like flies. Like flies," Mrs. Dag-og-Nat repeated grimly. "Whenever she left a town, she left broken hearts behind. For while she met many rich, handsome, intelligent, and kind young men, none of them had ancestors quite glorious enough to claim

for her own.

"Finally, she arrived in Molde, no different from a hundred other fishing ports, at first sight, flanked by mountains, forest, and sea. The priest offered her his box at the theater: an itinerant company was about to stage a show.

"It was new. It was German. It was about a captain, condemned to sail for all eternity, until he could find a woman to love him. Grandma intended to leave town as soon as she had discovered there were no aristocratic bachelors nearby, but the opera captivated her. She came back every night for a week, experiencing undiminished excitement each time the curtain, a stormscape on an old sail, came rattling up.

"The first night, true, she was so horrified to hear German sung, she almost left the theater in fright. But she realized none of these greasy singers was likely to recognize the rich Adelina Müller in disguise. Her worries dissolved in the music, and the next day—along with the rest of the town, it seemed—she found herself singing the opera's most important melodies as she sauntered down the street.

"She bought the vocal score from a deserving member of the chorus, and played it with the priest's wife on the church organ during the day. Perhaps she saw herself in Senta, the captain's daughter. For, although the music was sublime, the main reason she kept coming back was one of the tenors, Senta's mortal lover, Erik, who sang his few lines more beautifully than anyone, although rather blandly, as if he didn't understand the meaning of the words.

"The last night, Erik was missing. A fat Low German, sweating with stage fright, took his place. After the performance, Grandma approached the impresario—although his pleasure at discovering a compatriot almost made her flee—and asked him what had happened.

"He said that Svein—Erik's real name—had been thrown in jail for attempted murder. He wasn't even German, just some Norrman they'd auditioned in Stuvedal after their original Erik had committed suicide. Nobody really liked Svein. He had no training, no tact. Grandma suggested that perhaps they were just jealous of his natural talent, and the impresario agreed:

"'What is there to be jealous of, if not that?'

"The next day, after the troupe left town, Grandma visited Svein in jail. She walked past the forbidding little building several times before she found the courage to go in. She'd brought a loaf of raisin bread, wrapped in a lace handkerchief, because she thought that was what a real von Ædelskøld would do. The lace handkerchief had her false name on it in red, but was otherwise very clean.

"She ordered the guard to let her in. After only a week, she'd become more or less the Queen of Molde. The guard probably would have obeyed her if she'd asked him to set Svein free.

"Svein was sitting on a bench beside a pile of straw. It smelled bad. She gave him the raisin bread. Before devouring it, he offered her a piece. She found his manners bracing. She liked the shape of his hands.

"They spoke in Norsk—Grandma was already proficient—and he sang her songs from his village, much to the delight of the drunks with whom they were sharing the cell. Grandma began to question him about his past, and was overjoyed to find that Svein Dag-og-Nat, although he did not like to brag, was descended from the very first kings of Norway. More recently, his great-great-grandfather, famous for chastity, had been murdered—even assassinated!—in a pub.

"'I wish men wouldn't stay up so late,' Grandma said,

feeling ready to faint. 'But tell me more about cleaning fish,' she added, in case Svein thought she was criticizing him.

"'I like cleaning fish,' Svein said, 'because it gives me time to sing.' He'd gone to the audition for a lark; but when the Germans had offered to teach him proper technique, and show him the world, how could he refuse?

"He repeated the question several times, but Grandma didn't answer. She didn't understand why he looked so sad.

"'Will you marry me?' she asked. Svein swallowed the last of his raisin bread, and said yes.

"He was a good husband. He ordered books on the health and management of children. (They should never eat jam.) He asked for a castle on Otterøy, and she built him one—quite small, but with a turret where she spent her time transcribing folk music, or looking out the window—she changed the snow white curtains at regular intervals—while he caught a rather inconvenient quantity of fish. On sleepy afternoons, listening to her scratchy cylinders, she often heard his voice wafting melodies across the sea, and they got mixed up in her transcriptions, beautifully. Unfortunately, Svein was rather shy, and drowned before their first child could be born. Fortunately, Grandma's next husband, an old friend of her father's, could be persuaded to adopt the child, keep the castle as a summer house, and even take Svein's last name as his own.

"My family have been Dag-og-Nats ever since," Mrs. Dag-og-Nat concluded, turning off her Kindle. "Grandma had further adventures, searching for eternal youth. But I'll save those for another time. Once," she added confidentially, "she told me she wasn't sure Svein really *had* been an aristocrat. But when she was very old—I happened to be visiting her at the time—an equally old man came to the door. He had strangely thick white hair, and introduced

himself as the man Svein had tried to kill. He corroborated Svein's story in every point: the nobility of Svein's family, he assured her, was legendary. He was the one who told us the story of the Wends…"

For a while, they watched the fire.

"How did you know you could trust him?" Freja asked.

"He had no motive to lie." Mrs. Dag-og-Nat shrugged. "My guess is he just wanted to remind Grandma of Svein, one last time. And he did—of all the men she'd known, they were the only ones who cried."

"How old was she when she *went out of time*?"—Søren used the Swedish euphemism for "died."

Mrs. Dag-og-Nat looked at him piercingly.

"What a pity," Freja said, "you don't have a grandson, so I could marry him!"

"Can you sing?" Mrs. Dag-og-Nat asked.

"No," Freja said. "But I'm going to die."

"Ah," Mrs. Dag-og-Nat said, as if that would do. "I hope not too soon."

"Me, too," Freja said.

And Mrs. Dag-og-Nat began to sing. Her voice sounded just like Søren had thought it would, only better. The melody, a sort of melting glacier, was by Sibelius:

Why does spring take flight
just when he's getting warm?
I never ask such questions
because I don't want an answer.

Why did my darling leave me,
and let his breast grow cold?
Since all my summers turned to winters,
I stopped asking such questions.

Yet why is beauty transient
and loveliness a stranger?

"I'm going to fart," Kai said.

"You wicked thing," Mrs. Dag-og-Nat said. But she sounded tired. "Are any of you planning to sleep over?"

"We'd better be getting home," Jonas said.

"Where," Freja asked, "would we sleep?"

"At least stay for dinner," Mrs. Dag-og-Nat said, as Jonas sidled toward the door. "My grandson may be coming."

"I'd love to," Freja said.

"Me, too," whispered Mag.

"I guess dinner would be OK…" Jonas said.

"Excellent. You can wait in the nursery," Mrs. Dag-og-Nat said, and the fire slumped into a frown. She suddenly looked terrible, like a frozen bear—the way she just kept sitting there—and the children hurried out into the hall.

"Where's the nursery?" Søren said, looking up the stairs.

Jonas didn't seem to want to go up there. "If we just wait in the dining room," he said, "we'll be certain not to miss anything."

"I think we should wait exactly where she said," Søren said. But he followed the others into the dining room. It was odd, sitting among all those mirrors with the lights out and nothing to eat. He ran his fingers over the tabletop. In some places, the flowers didn't lie quite flat.

"I wonder how much of Mrs. Dag-og-Nat's story was true," Eskild said.

"I'm sure she wouldn't *lie*," Freja said defensively.

"Well, it was ninety percent the same when I was a boy," Jonas said.

Freja turned her back to the window and began to read.

Her pages were wrinkled, as usual, and everyone began to fall asleep. As his own eyelids drooped, Søren forced himself to stand.

"Don't go far," Jonas mumbled as Søren left the room.

He went back down into the kitchen, pushing against the rough-hewn walls. The freezer was humming and the light from the garden came in over the flowers, making it unusually yellow.

A small white door at the back of the kitchen felt very cool. Søren had to bend over to go in. Inside were an iron bed and a sink without a drain, and some striped socks on a plank shelf. Everything else was white, but the mirror over the bed was tarnished, and Søren liked the way it made him look—old. He lay on the bed, which squealed softly, and the rising dust put him in a nostalgic mood. The smell sent him to sleep.

CHAPTER X

SØREN'S DREAM

HE DREAMED of the Morra, of course. It was his first night on Otterøy. Almost as soon as his eyelids had closed, he began to feel the beat of her subterranean drum. Freja had led everyone to a part of the island Søren had never seen before, although he'd thought he'd seen every part of the island. They were supposed to be looking for red trumpet mushrooms, a favorite of Grandma's that no one quite believed in, but Søren kept seeing squirrels. They were unusually grey, and the ash trees throbbed with unripe berries.

And then there was the well. Its mossy roof frowned almost to the ground, fringed with trembling flowers: red, and blue, and gold.

"Look," Freja said, leaning so far over, Søren thought she would fall in. "It's me in there."

But Søren could see only shadows and dirt, oozing

between the stones.

And then the mushrooms, as if someone had turned on their light. He picked one up, but let it go. It prickled. There was no splash.

Freja held onto hers until, with a grunt, she flung it on the grass. Her palms were smeared with blood. "It isn't mine," she said defensively, wiping her hands.

The well was full of fish. They seemed to be swimming through light instead of water. The light gathered in their fins. A blood-red trumpetfish, a lionfish with a golden mane, and a sky-blue marmalotte, they circled as sovereignly as swans, glancing up now and then from under heavy lids. They had such beautiful lashes!

"I think we're supposed to pick one," Mag said, leaning over the well. Jonas held the back of her shirt to keep her from falling in.

"Blue!" she said, and the marmalotte leaped into her hand.

There was a sound like wind blowing across the top of a cave, and Mag was gone.

For a moment, Søren couldn't see anything, then he heard a splash.

'I put my hand in something,' Eskild said calmly. "And I can't get it out."

The yellow lionfish had swallowed Eskild up to the elbow. It blinked benevolently above its taut ring of teeth. Freja grabbed Eskild's arm, Søren held onto his foot, but they were scraped off by rough lips, and Eskild vanished into the lionfish, which dove into the pond, which must have been a lot deeper than it seemed.

'Red,' Freja said, and the trumpetfish swam into her hands. She went up in flame. Behind her, Søren caught a glimpse of the Morra. He'd never seen her this close before.

She vanished, smiling, along with the smoke.

'How can we follow,' Jonas complained, 'when there are no more fish?'"

He sounded heartbroken, then smiled. Reflecting the campfire, his eyes turned gold. He was telling the scary story faster and faster, yet at the same time, very slow. Søren grabbed his arm, but Jonas shook him off. The Morra was getting closer with every word. When Søren saw the lilacs behind Jonas twitch, he decided the time had come to flee.

Branches whipped his face. He tripped so often, he was practically running on his hands and knees. He ran until the only thing chasing him was the sound of his own breath. He ran until the ache in his side forced him to the ground. Then he climbed a tree. But the branches turned slippery, and he fell. For a moment, he lost the power of sight.

The forest here was tall and sparse. He shifted his focus between the sky and leaves. It took an awfully long time for a squirrel to swirl up a tree, its redness moving like a stain through the moonlight. Søren drew up a cushion, hoping it was insect-free. But everything that lay in the forest long enough became clean.

Even Søren. He was beginning to fall asleep again when he heard another song. It sounded reassuringly human, this time:

Now the sun kisses my eyelids;
the wind seethes.
I smell the moist earth;
everything is spiced and soft.

My foot fumbles forward
over stone and root.
Far away, a cow bellows,
in the morning dew.

In my bosom—a clarinet:
my only comfort when I have wept.
Mountains of songs
lie hidden under its keys.

Wherever I go, small children dance.
Their silken cheeks and hair,
small hands in mine,
feel like the ghost of spring.

Her basket was full of mushrooms. Her face was smooth and puffy, like a mushroom, and Søren would have guessed she was only forty, if it hadn't been for the mushroom-shaped hunch in her back. She was obviously blind.

"You're pretty," he wanted to say. But he'd learned that strange women—and even more so, men—did not appreciate this remark. So he just said,

"Hi."

"You're awfully small to be alone in the woods," she replied.

"Thank you," Søren said, trying to sound harmless. Even to a blind person, perhaps, the moonlight helped bring out the child in him, conceal the dangerous young man. "I was gathering mushrooms with my sister," he said. "But then she abandoned me."

"She doesn't sound very nice," the old woman said. If she *was* the Morra, she'd chosen a pleasant form. Not like the one that had bitten Freja last year—a sort of a cross between

a scorpion and a bear. Søren put his hand in his pocket, and pricked it on the thorn he'd been keeping there.

"Well, I love her," he said, suppressing a tear.

"Well, I'm not only looking for mushrooms, but little children as well!" the old woman said. "Are you interested in taking music lessons?"

"Yes," Søren said.

The old woman sat down, sticking her legs straight out.

"What kind of instrument would I learn?" Søren asked.

"Theory, first," she said, picking some snakegrass. "Once you can imagine music clearly, reading it is easy. And once you can read it, you can learn any instrument, soon enough. More importantly, you will still be able to enjoy music after you go deaf."

"Am I going to go deaf?" Søren asked, a little eagerly.

"If you live long enough," the old woman replied.

"Really, I'd rather learn to sing," he said.

"Everyone can sing," the old woman said, and Søren lost a lot of confidence in her.

"Sing for me," she said.

He opened his mouth, but she raised her hand:

"Wait. Let's live in hope a little longer. Try playing this, first."

She slit the tube of snakegrass down the middle and handed it to him.

He covered it with spit, but made no sound.

"Let me," the old woman said, and played a nasal "Für Elise," magical if only because it came from an object that was not her body. What other instruments, Søren wondered, might not just be lying around?

"Have you been to conservatory?" he asked.

"Long ago," the old woman said. "But I didn't graduate."

"Why not?" Søren asked.

"My mother died," the old woman said. "You might have thought that would make me a better musician, but it didn't. Maybe I didn't love her enough. Anyway, I indulged in an excess of grief."

"How?" Søren asked.

"I burned down the school," she said. "That's how I went blind."

Søren was horrified.

"Were there any pianos inside?"

"Yes. And the worst part is, I didn't have one at home."

"Still, there must have been a church where you could play."

"The strange thing is, I couldn't play the piano anymore. My fingers just slid off the keys. So I began to teach myself the clarinet. Grandma had a fine clarinet she could play after the manner of her people. Once, she said the clarinet was the king of the instruments, but Mother said, 'No, I shouldn't have thought that it was…' Since that day, I have been an amateur at heart. I do get paid for lessons, though: twenty crowns an hour."

"When can I start?" Søren asked.

"First thing tomorrow?"

"OK." He shook her hand. He'd forgotten there was blood in it. It stung during the handshake, and afterwards swirled back into his palm. There was no such thing, he seemed to hear Mother say, as "community" that was not based in religion or blood.

He looked at the old woman affectionately. She'd fallen asleep, but he didn't feel bad about leaving her. She didn't look as if wild animals would eat her. Something in her dreams was making her smile, and the place claimed her so utterly, it seemed as if roots would grow over her, and mushrooms start sprouting from her skin.

CHAPTER XI

THE SHEEPBOY OF PEARLS

AS SØREN woke up, it smelled like a campfire had been recently extinguished, and he feared he was going to be late for church. But no one was in Mrs. Dag-og-Nat's kitchen. And, in the garden, you could tell it was still very early by the color of the sun.

As he walked home through the birches, another song had begun. Unlike the others, it was light and young. The words fell as easily as rain, and the music definitely wasn't by Sibelius. In fact, it put Søren in mind of medieval Spain.

Blackberry bushes hid the singer, but you could scoot around them onto a silty shelf, covered by the veiny stream. There was a white rock in the middle, and a fishing pole in the rock. As the sun ran up the fishing line, it filled the boy's hair, as white as milkweed silk:

Sheepboy of pearls,
son of the dawn:
where are you going
so early on this frosty morning?

As you are the first star
of my dawn,
you are born first
to bring the day.
Pastor and shepherd,
without wool or a hut,
where are you going
so early on this frosty morning?

Pearls in your eyes,
laughter in your mouth,
to pleasure and annoyance
you provoke our souls.
With your pearly hair
and mouth flushed crimson:
where are you going
so early on this frosty morning?

What must you do,
sheepboy holy,
singing so early in the morning?

You give us to hear,
while you go to see—
the soul undisguised.
O, where are you going
so early on this frosty morning?

"Hey," Søren said, but the boy didn't stop. He didn't even look up.

Søren climbed onto the rock, impressed by his own courage.

"Are you deaf?" he asked, raising a hand to shade his eyes.

The boy's face was so white, it was hard to see: just a shimmer where his brows should be, and a flush around his mouth. But his eyes, when he finally opened them, were blue.

"Hi," Søren said again.

"Hi," the boy said, in Otterese. "I'm partially deaf."

"Oh," Søren said, then said it again more loudly.

"Do you know what this is?" the boy asked, lifting up the Thing.

"Kind of," Søren said modestly. "Do you like it?"

"It *looks* like a boat," the boy said.

"Well, it kind of *is*…" Søren was enjoying getting to know someone all on his own. He could imagine his family standing around watching him, getting soggy feet. "I found something like that, once," he said, referring to the Thing. "It washed up on the beach, and I pretended someone had made it specially for me. Then I began to feel like I had stolen it, so I put it back."

The boy seemed to see something alarming behind Søren, but Søren could hear it was only Yap, who came splashing up onto the rock and licked the boy's face, beating Søren's with his tail. He offered the boy his paw; after feeling around for a while, the boy pulled out a thorn, and Yap whined and jumped back into the river for a long drink.

"I wonder what it feels like to get a thorn in your paw?" Søren said.

The boy handed him the thorn.

"Thanks," Søren said, putting it in his pocket. "So if you're partially deaf," he said, "how can you hear yourself

sing?"

"My bones," the boy said. "They hum."

"Maybe you should get one of those hearing aids that is implanted directly into your skull," Søren suggested.

"Maybe," the boy said. "But then I wouldn't get to sit in my special chair at school. I don't like talking to the other kids."

Søren knew how he felt. "Do you like talking to me?" he asked.

The boy didn't answer.

"What were you singing about?" Søren asked softly.

"Nothing in particular," the boy said. "Just the way I felt."

"I thought it sounded familiar."

"My name is Olle, by the way. At least, that's what everyone calls me."

"They call me Søren," Søren said. For some reason, he said it in French. Then his special relationship with the boy began to fade.

They continued making small talk for quite some time, speaking so clearly, Søren began to wish all conversations were carried on as if one of the participants were deaf. It felt less like a competition this way. And it was nice to be able to understand every word.

But the wind was rising. Yap whined, and a raindrop grazed Søren's cheek. "I'll be late for my music lesson," Søren said.

"What?" Olle said.

"I mean, I'll be late for church."

Olle dropped the Thing into the river and began to follow it away.

"Will I ever see you again?" Søren asked, but Olle didn't reply.

By the time Søren got home, the rest of his family were in their Sunday clothes, having pancakes with rhubarb syrup. Then they got their umbrellas and walked to church.

CHAPTER XII
IN THE HALL OF THE SQUIRREL KING, PART I

THE HYMNS sounded great, especially since on Otterøy it was socially unacceptable for the congregation really to sing. They left harmony and even melody mostly to the organ, and instead concentrated on the words, creating a collective Sprechstimme that often reduced Søren to tears. Father Dorsten said we know God by means of the same sense with which we distinguish good from evil, Christ from Hitler, Beethoven from Taylor Swift. Obviously, the quality of our moral intuition was in decline.

He'd never get away with saying such things on the mainland, Søren thought. But the Church of Norway might be surprised to find how much it went on existing, here… He realized that Olle was the boy who'd been sitting in the pew in front of him for years. But he never went to Sunday

school afterwards. Perhaps they wouldn't give him a special chair.

He came to Grandma's house for dinner, though. He turned out to be even deafer indoors, so whenever Father Dorsten thought it was important for him to hear something, he'd repeat it in a dumbed-down way, right into his ear. He seemed shy of Søren's family, whom he'd never been willing to visit before. Of course, they must have seemed more terrible in their own home.

Father Dorsten said that fear of ghosts was nothing next to fear of *a* ghost.

"The Holy Ghost?" Grandma asked.

"I certainly don't believe in any other."

"What do you think he looks like?" Mother asked. "I've always pictured him as young and bald, riding a cloud, like one of the trebles in *The Magic Flute*."

"I think you'd have trouble giving me chapter and verse for that," Father Dorsten said.

Grandma said, "In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold wrote, 'One may say that to be reared a member of a national Church is in itself a lesson of religious moderation, and a help towards culture and harmonious perfection. Instead of battling for his own private forms for expressing the inexpressible and defining the undefinable, a man has leisure and composure to satisfy other sides of his nature as well.'"

"So, you picture him as a dove?" Father Dorsten said.

"The Holy Ghost let our cat out the window," Olle said.

"When?" Freja asked skeptically.

"Fifteen years ago," Olle said, and began to cry.

Grandma poured the coffee. "Why don't you take the children upstairs?" she said.

"OK," Jonas said, with glittering eyes.

It was the first time Søren had been in Jonas' room since

he'd learned the Arabic alphabet there last year. It didn't smell *bad*, but you kept looking around for a parrot or something. Jonas kicked the Persian rug away from the door—the part where he kicked it was growing bare—and threw some orange gauze over the light. He closed the blinds, then walked in tightening circles until he sat cross-legged on the floor. Mag curled up in his lap. Everyone but Søren seemed to know where to go. Kai took a running jump onto the bed, twisting Jonas' blankets into a nest. Olle sat on Jonas' embroidered throne. Finally, Søren plopped down by Eskild and Freja in the beanbag, without even asking for permission.

"Close the door," Jonas said, and by the time Søren got back, Jonas was already handing around the pipe. It was made of clay, and could play three notes like an ocarina. Probably it *was* an ocarina. After inhaling, Freja let the smoke spill through the finger holes. She handed the pipe to Søren, who sighed, but did not cough. He hoped Olle was impressed. Everyone else knew that Jonas' herbs, which he gathered himself, were mostly raspberry leaves.

"It's June," Jonas said, "and the meadow is green. The Mountain is still covered with snow. Colorful bugs are buzzing from flower to flower, and it smells just amazing. This is 'The Story of Satan's Potatoes,' by the way."

"Yes," Mag said, closing her eyes. Søren closed his, too.

"A girl is washing her clothes in the stream. She is tall and has red hair… Well, perhaps *you'd* better tell me what she looks like," he said to Freja, a little flirtatiously.

"Like the ballet student she once was," she began, after a pause. "Too big and quick. Prone to falls. She has a friendly, seed-potato nose and tiny, mistrustful eyes. No lips to speak of. Although she is by far the largest member of her family, she's the only one who hasn't grown into her teeth…

Sometimes," Freja added more softly, "she thinks she was adopted, because of the color of her hair."

Jonas looked a little abashed. "She's very beautiful," he said, "but she doesn't waste time thinking about it. She isn't looking at herself when she happens to notice the reflection of a silk monkey in the water. She doesn't look around, because she's afraid the silk monkey will disappear."

Søren wished it had been a unicorn. But the story was obviously for Freja.

"The silk monkey breathes a secret into her ear. It is something Freja is very glad to hear. The silk monkey walks away, and Freja follows it, leaving her clothes in the water.

"The silk monkey leads her to the Mountain. It is much taller than Freja remembers. The silk monkey keeps finding these white paths, made of sand, behind bushes or boulders. In the sand, which is deep, every step lifts you twenty feet. It's tiring, but fast. Soon, the sky is so thin, Freja can see stars all around, even in the ground beneath her feet, which is full of diamonds. On top of the mountain, everything is black or white. There is no difference between sun and stars, and Freja stops and looks around, but there is nowhere left to go. Then the silk monkey chirps and grabs her hand. What is this it has found?"

Jonas paused for effect, but Olle apparently thought he'd run out of ideas.

"The silk monkey has found a cave that goes straight down," Olle said, "like a well, right where the top of the mountain should be. The silk monkey jumps in, and Freja fears it will fall to the center of the Earth. But, instead, it finds a staircase made of stone. A spiral staircase, whose stairs are so narrow, Freja presses herself against the wall for fear of falling."

Apparently, Olle hadn't yet realized that Freja wasn't

afraid of anything, and Søren looked around in embarrassment. But no one else seemed to mind.

"She goes deeper and deeper," Olle said, "and when it gets too dark, the silk monkey's face begins to glow. It looks a lot like a barn owl. As the cave widens, Freja notices a lot of small animals running away. They flap, squeak, and click in a terrifying way, but she keeps going until she reaches a pair of studded doors. Light blazes between and below them, and faint music can be heard. She can't see any way to open the doors, but the silk monkey sticks its paw into a paw-shaped slot, and they swing open smoothly. Your turn," Olle said.

Jonas grinned. "The dining hall is magnificent," he said, "full of squirrels, and everything they most like to eat: platters of roasted roly-polys and grasshopper pie; pyramids of pumpkin loaves and walnut surprise; hemispheres of marzipan hake and minnows *en gelée*; a river of chocolate—dark, milk, and white—carrying crystallized violets right down the center of the table. But it all gets eaten before it falls off the end. Squirrels love chocolate so much, in order to eat it without having heart attacks, they have to practice living with their greatest fears, in the form of chandeliers: eagles, owls, polecats, stuffed mid-pounce, they swivel slowly overhead, with glittering eyes.

"The squirrel king gestures for Freja to sit by him. On her plate is a roasted chicken with little knees to hold onto. As soon as she touches it, the breast meat springs open and begins to fill with butter and herbs. Everyone seems to be watching her eat. She assumes they are admiring her as they gossip behind their bony hands. The most beautiful squirrels agree to let her be their friend.

"When Freja lifts the carcass to gnaw on its edges, however, she finds a naked little squirrel boy underneath. He

looks even more human than the other squirrels. She pokes him gently with her fork, and lifts him on its prongs. She drops him onto her palm. She can feel his breathing and toothpick ribs—even the pulse of his heart through his velvet skin. He is very dark red.

"'The prophecy has been fulfilled!' the King proclaims, and the court applauds. The prime minister makes a speech, and presents Freja with the Order of the Tail."

While Jonas savored the moment, Olle went on:

"Then something very sad happens," he said. "The King adopts Freja and betroths her to his son. But at the engagement ceremony, when they both kiss, the squirrel prince turns into a human baby, full-size, squalling on the tablecloth, without any diapers on. The squirrels are aghast.

"'What have you done to my son?' the Squirrel King asks.

"Freja doesn't know. She gathers up the baby in the table cloth and presses him to her chest. He looks just like a heap of potatoes, which is why this is called 'The Story of Satan's Potatoes.'"

"Ah…" Jonas said.

"'Now we must run away,' Freja says, and runs. The squirrels try to climb her legs, but she thwacks them off. They assault her with tiny swords, but she kicks them away. She tries to avoid stepping on anyone, but now and then there is a nasty crunch. Still, she manages to close the doors without trapping any tails.

"'Don't worry,' she says to the squirrel prince. 'We will find a way to break this spell. Then we will get married.'"

That seemed to be the end of the story.

Freja's cheeks glowed.

"Isn't there any more?" Søren asked.

"Yes, but it hasn't happened yet," Olle said.

"Well, I'm going swimming," Freja said, standing up.

"Are you coming, Eskild?"

"You can't go swimming on Sunday," Olle said. "The devil's in the water."

"Really…?" Freja said, as if intrigued, and Søren heard footsteps on the stairs. Jonas hid the pipe under his pillow. Mag opened the window.

Grandma knocked before she came in.

"Olle?" she said. "Your uncle wants you."

Olle looked at her, as if deciding whether or not he could hear.

No one said goodbye, and he closed the door rather loudly. The gauze came off and fluttered to the floor, and Søren shut his eyes to keep out the light.

CHAPTER XIII
IN THE HALL OF THE SQUIRREL KING, PART II

THE next morning, Søren and Eskild were walking down the shore, trying to remember the language they had made up last summer (it only contained a few hundred words), when Søren said,

"I wish there really *were* a cave on the island."

"How can you be sure there isn't?" Eskild said.

So they decided to search.

At low tide, the seafloor on the shallow side of the causeway was like an obsidian mirror. The water blistered across it from left to right. The boys held hands to keep from slipping, and the ocean hissed around their feet. As they climbed up the other side, Søren thought he saw something step behind a tree. He didn't mention it to Eskild, since he didn't want to seem neurotic or spoil what might turn out to

be an exciting surprise. If things wanted to, it was usually best just to let them hide.

As they headed towards the mountain, Eskild developed the habit of slashing foliage as he passed. Sometimes, it bled white. Sometimes, it slashed back. Søren was proud that Eskild liked his knife, but wished he would use it in a more sophisticated way.

Søren tried not to look behind him. He had the feeling he was being followed by a squirrel. It seemed to be a different squirrel every time. Whenever he thought it was looking at him, he politely averted his eyes.

When they reached the large white rock, Søren and Eskild decided to hold a sacrifice. They didn't discuss the victim beforehand, and Søren felt somewhat like Isaac, helping Abraham gather wood. But a beetle clung to one of the sticks, and stayed there when it came time to ignite. Its smoke was bitter, and afterwards Eskild seemed sad. Søren recited a psalm:

> *But the wicked shall perish.*
> *The enemies of Jehovah shall be like flowers.*
> *In smoke shall they vanish.*

He wished Uncle Jonas were there. He almost felt like running away, even though this game was usually the centerpiece of its day. He had the sense that Eskild, too, would rather be somewhere else. With Freja, probably.

Probably, the sacrifice had been for her.

The mountain wasn't that tall, but it had a truly mountainous shape, with climate change at the shoulders, and a bald peak, and it took an hour to climb. The boys had brought no food or water, so Søren had an excuse to pick some of those green berries that made your stomach ache.

And when they reached the snow-fed stream, Eskild got down on his knees and drank.

"You'll get E. Coli," Søren said, impressed.

Eskild wiped his mouth.

"I wonder what time we'll get back," he said.

"I think maybe since we're *both* gone they won't get worried," Søren said. How long would it take before anyone came looking for them? "Maybe they'll think we ran away together!"

"Hmm," Eskild said.

Then Søren saw a mountain goat. He'd never seen one before. It was about the same size as him, and something about the way it looked at him—probably the angle—made him lose his balance and go skating down the scree. He stopped just before he went over the edge. Eskild helped him back up. Søren was pleased to see he looked concerned.

"What would you have done if I'd died?" he asked, but Eskild didn't reply.

They had to scrabble up the last part. It was a lot of fun. The rock provided excellent traction, and Søren felt wonderfully weightless, standing up on the summit at last, as if caught in the instant between falling and flight.

The forest looked like moss from here. Each species of tree had a special way of clumping together or falling apart. To the east, the mainland's ragged line seemed to be going up in smoke. To the west, the ocean looked as if it had been frozen by sun.

"Look at this," Eskild said, and it took Søren a while to realize he was pointing at the ground.

There *was* a cave on top of the mountain. At least, there was a hole, and it definitely hadn't been there last year. It seemed deeper as Søren swooned, but when Eskild dropped himself in, with a splash, his head remained above ground.

"Pity…" Søren said. "Is it cold?"

"Yes," Eskild said, climbing out.

And that was the end, apparently, of their quest.

Eskild finished drying his feet. "Is it time to go home?" he said, and Søren couldn't think of a reason to say no.

It got dark much faster than seemed right for June. The clouds thickened as the boys climbed down. The rustling pines made Søren unsure whether he could hear their secret follower or not.

Yes—there it was, in the bottom of each gust. At first, one, then two, then three… Each time, it sounded more courageous than before. Still, it wasn't *quite* real enough to mention to Eskild, and Søren wished he'd brought a flashlight. In the present air, it would've been as good as a sword.

Something big and shaggy fell to the ground. There was a piercing sensation in Søren's neck.

"Ouch!" Eskild said.

Søren examined what had stung him. It was an acorn. The chattering grew triumphant as nuts began to fly. Each nut hurt more than the last. One struck Søren's eye, making it hard for him to see as the big thing staggered to its feet. It seemed to want to chase them, too, and for a while they ran. They kept running even when it said its name was Jonas.

"Tell them to stop throwing nuts!" he said.

But Søren didn't know how to speak Squirrel.

They swam across the river. Since the trees didn't meet overhead, the squirrels couldn't follow.

"Don't tell Mag about the cave," Jonas panted. It had been hard for him to swim with a pickax on his back. "I've been digging ever since the snow melted. I know Mag will love it, if only it's deep enough."

"*I* thought it was pretty deep," Søren said.

Eskild shook the water off his head.

"It's not much so far," Jonas said modestly, "but eventually it's going to be a wonderful surprise."

"What are you going to put in it?" Søren asked.

"That's the surprise," Jonas said, and draped his coat over Søren's shoulders. This just made Søren colder.

"Were you spying on us?" Eskild asked.

"Yes. I wanted to see your reaction," Jonas said.

"Oh," Eskild said.

"And I was scared: the cave came up so much higher on you than it did on me!"

Eskild seemed skeptical, but you couldn't walk together far on such a night, in such wet clothes, without beginning to feel camaraderie. The smell of Grandma's lilacs was absurdly strong.

"We'd better wash our shoes," Jonas whispered, taking them off on the front steps. His trousers were muddy, too. He washed them with the hose. He used the power-nozzle, and Søren shivered, waiting for his turn. He was still so young—apparently, so was Jonas—that being cold was indistinguishable from the sensation of "having fun."

He raised the stream toward Jonas' head. Jonas grabbed the hose and plastered him to the ground. Eskild, teeth full of moonlight, had just joined in when Freja appeared at the door, and held it open until they'd all gone inside. She looked at them suspiciously, as if she thought they'd been laughing about her. Søren tried to give her a hug, but she pushed him away.

He'd forgotten he was so wet.

In the kitchen, Eskild and Jonas said agreeable things to each other while they got out crackers and cheese. Their water fight, for all its brevity, had established a bond. Søren sat at the table and watched them, but found no way to

participate. They didn't even seem to notice when he went upstairs.

An hour later, he was reading Tintin by lamplight—"*Comme ça, je pourrais m'approcher de l'autre sans éveiller sa méfiance*," the boy reporter said, donning the skin of the gorilla he'd just shot—when he heard a knock at the door. Jonas stuck in his head.

"I don't have any socks," he said. "Can I borrow some of yours?"

"Sure," Søren said, flattered, and rummaged through his drawer.

Did Jonas wear socks to bed?

At last, he found an unornamented pair and handed them to his uncle, who remained standing in the hall.

"I hope they're not too small," Søren said.

"Don't worry," Jonas said. "I'm sure they'll stretch." He closed the door.

Søren stood looking at it for a second.

In his bed on the other side of the room, Kai did not seem to have woken up, but Søren still whispered, "Sorry," as he turned out the light.

CHAPTER XIV
THE FRUIT OF THE TREE OF NOBILITY

HE WOKE up a few hours later to the sensation of Freja sitting on his bed. He could tell it was her just by the storm of dissatisfaction and mixed intentions crackling over her head.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Come for a walk," she said, and stood by the door until he got dressed.

The wind was loud and the clouds were thin. The moon itself looked cloudy in this predawn light. The clock on the microwave had said 3:04 a.m.

Freja walked along the beach until the house was out of sight. The breakers were roaring. She was wearing a swimsuit under her clothes. Søren looked away, but she said,

"I need you to watch in case I don't come back."

"Should I get help?" Søren asked.

"Not yet."

Shoulders hunched, she waded out.

"Don't touch my clothes," she said. She looked as if she were going to say something else, then dropped.

Her head reappeared quite far away, bobbing between the waves. She began to do the Australian Crawl. As the oldest child, she'd had all kinds of "lessons," and liked to pass them on. Once, she'd even tried to teach Søren ballet. That hadn't lasted long.

"Come back," he called.

Surprisingly, she did, carrying a seashell full of moonlight. It had white ribs and brown skin. It was so big. You just didn't find shells like that around here.

"It's for you," Freja said.

Søren was so charmed, he sat down in the sand.

"I'll always remember you by it," he said.

Fortunately, she didn't hear.

"Come on," she said, putting on her clothes. She took him to the doghouse where the Fruit of the Tree of Nobility grew on a withered little bush. It was sticky, yellow, and revolting to commoners. But perhaps nine months of noble thoughts had purified her blood. Or maybe she'd gotten lucky with one of her transfusions.

She took a bite. She chewed.

"Was it good?" Søren asked, in awe.

"Better than it used to be," Freja said. Then she threw up.

"Maybe next year," Søren said, without thinking, and Freja wiped her mouth.

CHAPTER XV

THE BURIED SYMPHONY

IT WAS too late to go back to bed, so Søren wandered around the house, looking for a new place to read. He didn't even need to turn on a light, since everywhere was new, at this time of day. Eventually, he settled in the back parlor window, opened the New Testament in French, and began to fall asleep.

When he opened his eyes, Grandma was knitting in the rocking chair to his left. She seemed to have no trouble looking right past him. The mist was melting in the pines, running down the branches. Søren's shell sloshed with light. He tried not to spill any, handing it to Grandma. She was the only person he could think of who might enjoy it more than him.

"Well, you've bearded the dragon in her lair," she said, as usual when one came in here without an invitation. But the shell sent a smile across her face.

"What's that yellow fruit," Søren asked, "behind the doghouse?"

"The Finnish boy brought it with him," Grandma said, "for safekeeping. He was the only one who liked it."

"I guess you need the proper genes. What Finnish boy?" he added quickly. If you let her conversations fall, Grandma might never pick them up.

"Your grandfather," she said.

"That's right. What was his name again?"

"Järnefelt. Technically, that's your name, too."

"Would he really have been killed if he'd stayed in Finland?" It was a story Søren always liked to hear.

"Well, he might not have had very much to eat. Most of the children went to Sweden, of course, but we had personal ties."

"Wistling loved him…"

"He was Aino's nephew." Such familiar reference to Sibelius' wife! "They bore a strong family resemblance. I never saw such a rectangular little boy."

Then she made the face that meant she was about to say something new:

"For a while, I thought he'd smuggled a manuscript of the 8th Symphony into our home."

"Why would she have given it to a little boy?" Søren gasped. He felt as if the baby sister he'd been told was dead had actually been put up for adoption.

"My theory is that Aino was saving it from the flames. She wouldn't have wanted to give it to an adult, who might publish it. Yet she couldn't help…throwing seeds into the wind? Perhaps it was only fragments. Or very bad. She told me the pleasure she took, when she was very old, watching him burn his work every night. For decades into the Silence of Ainola, he continued to write… But I'm sure she

exaggerated."

"I wonder if she gave him the fruit, as well," Søren said.

"It's just a theory of mine," Grandma said, coolly. "But"—meeting Søren's eyes—"if he *did* bring the manuscript, it's probably still here. He was the burying type. In the house. Or in the yard. He got along so well with our dogs."

"Oh," Søren said.

The symphony was probably just another of Grandma's wild goose chases. She never went on them herself. But she'd convinced Søren he was heir to a mystery—a part of Otterøy itself.

"I opened his luggage," she said confidentially. "He was in the room at the time. There were lots of socks, and that grey cap he liked to wear, even when he was old—relatively. We buried him in it, underneath the mountain."

"I wish I'd been there," Søren said.

"And a bundle of music, tied up with string. The notes were handwritten. I remember that clearly. I asked what they were, but he wouldn't answer. He couldn't speak Norwegian, at the time. I tried learning Finnish, later. But it was just too hard."

"I know," Søren sighed.

"I thought he might be a great composer—speaking of the proper genes. But when I sat him down at the piano, *I* had to introduce *him* to the keys. He enjoyed watching me play, however, and asked for music to his favorite scenes—the swan of Tuonela, the fall of Valhalla, la liberté guidant le peuple… Mostly, his requests were familiar, like the wedding feast of Prince Riquet with the Tuft, when the kind earth opened to reveal that spectacle of white-capped cooks. But others seemed to spring out of his own square head. Or maybe the *Kalevala.* To be honest, I've never gotten around

to reading the whole book… In one vignette, there was a procession of naked boys, carrying a rose over their shoulders. It had such big thorns!"

"I've seen them," Søren said.

Grandma looked up.

"Have you been getting along with your uncle Jonas?"

"Well, he doesn't seem so scared this year."

"Good," she grunted, inviting him to leave. "Remember your shell." It didn't look so enormous in her hands.

"I want *you* to have it," Søren whined. No one ever seemed to accept anything from him. Even the sea had sent back his Thing.

"What would *I* want it for?" she asked, although her mantelpiece was gleaming with similar things. The difference, he guessed, was that she'd found them herself.

His resentment, however, was mixed with relief as the shell regained its former size and luster, becoming an essential ingredient in his plan for turning Eskild back into himself.

How had Eskild changed? Well, at breakfast, for instance, he drank orange juice, which he didn't like, and fed Yip under the table, which went against his principles. Afterwards, he picked out a tune on the player piano, which he didn't know how to play. Then he neglected to brush his teeth. How would Eskild, of all people, look if they turned brown?

Worst of all, he seemed to be falling in love with Freja, which would explain why this summer, for all its richness of incident, had been such a colossal disappointment so far. Søren no longer tried to deny it. Eskild hardly even seemed to recognize him when he suggested they look for goose eggs. But he seemed willing to take him for granted, as there was nothing better to do, and followed him outside.

While goose eggs would be nice, Søren's real plan was to

start a water fight, like the one that had almost been so much fun last night. He hoped it would provide an opening to make Eskild drink out of Freja's shell.

"Eskild?" he asked.

His cousin was staring at some blackbirds.

"I want to throw rocks at them," he said.

"No," Søren said solemnly, "you don't."

"I guess not." Eskild laughed.

The White Spring was full of bubbles, so usually Eskild would drink without encouragement. But today he seemed to be thinking about something else.

"Aren't you thirsty?" Søren asked, offering him the shell.

"Nah," Eskild said.

"It's good." Søren drank some of the water himself. It made him dizzy, so he decided to fall into the spring. When Eskild tried to help him out, Søren pulled him in.

Eskild surfaced, spluttering. He could hardly have avoided swallowing *something*. But now Søren couldn't find his shell. It had sunk right to the bottom, as if with a knell, of this summer's list of lost things. It seemed less important to look for it now than to make the water fight a success. Eskild still seemed unsure whether to be angry or amused, and Søren splashed him, rather anxiously, in one direction or the other. But Eskild didn't splash back. He was watching someone come out of the woods.

"You've been following us again?" he asked.

"I was just on my way to the mountain…" Jonas seemed to have trouble meeting Eskild's eyes. "Then I thought you were having a fight." He seemed to be expecting to be told to get lost, but Søren was so flattered that anyone might think he was capable of getting into a fight, he said,

"Why don't you come with us, Uncle Jonas? We're hunting eggs."

Jonas grinned. "I remember seeing one, a little way back," he said. "It was blue."

By the time they got there, however, it had already been eaten. They found some goose eggs on the way, though, buried in the rushes by the creek. Most of them were like potatoes, mottled brown or pink, but Søren's favorite was long and green. Perhaps it had been laid by an eider, or even a crane. He couldn't wait to show it to Grandma. It was even better than a seashell. Should they eat it, though, or try to make it hatch? Perhaps it would become a swan!

He really shouldn't have been running. Though he barely stumbled, the egg leaped out of his hand. Miraculously, it didn't break—then Søren stepped on it. He couldn't stop himself. The crunch was like a giant insect, and so was the goo. He made a face at the others, showing them the bottom of his shoe.

"I'm hungry," Jonas said, and they all went home.

As they entered the kitchen, Mother was washing out a bowl. Freja and Mag were eating toast with cloudberry jam. Kai was sitting under the table, holding Yap by the cheeks, staring deeply into his eyes. His tail wagged.

Søren put the goose eggs on to boil. He asked Mag what she wanted to be when she grew up. She said a cleaning lady because she liked cleaning.

Kai said, "I want to live in a house with a dirt floor so I can dig holes in it."

Grandma said, "This part of the house used to have a dirt floor, but it wasn't as nice as it sounds. The older I get, the more I believe in progress."

"It *is* amazing," Mother said, as if making a concession, "how we live in a society where anyone, if he wishes, can have a warm bath *à la reine de Saba,* every day."

As if to avoid taking a hint, Jonas began talking to Søren

about geese. This made it hard to overhear Freja and Eskild's far more interesting tête-à-tête. It seemed Freja was objecting, in the adage "Hate the sin, love the sinner," to the use of the word *hate*.

After a while, she took Eskild up to her room. Søren followed them halfway up the stairs, then ran out of momentum and drifted back. He watched Grandma knit for a few minutes, but could tell he was just getting on her nerves, so he wandered over to the bookcase to look at the titles. That's where Uncle Jonas was standing.

"Do you want to come up to my room?" he asked.

"What a good idea," Grandma remarked.

So Søren went. He glanced at Freja's door as he passed, but he couldn't hear anything.

He'd never played with Jonas all by himself before. He was more nervous than flattered. Whatever expectations Jonas might have, Søren couldn't possibly live up to them. Even if he were just supposed to sit there in companionable silence, he wouldn't be able to do it as well as Mag.

Jonas opened the blinds and put on *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. He got out his puff paints and began working on an apron that was going to be Grandma's birthday present.

Let's play Gentle Tag, he wrote. Then, *My favorite bird is regrets.*

Søren spent a long time choosing a color.

"I don't know what to write," he said.

"How about, 'The first step in becoming a moral person is to silence your conscience; too often it just speaks in the voice of your parents'?" Jonas suggested.

"Oh," Søren said. "That seems too long."

And false. Mother's mutterings might hurt his feelings, but they inspired him to improve.

Every child should be a serious composer, he wrote in glittering

green.

"That's so true," Jonas said.

There's no difference between a good person and a fortunate person, Søren added. The bottles were very soft.

"This is going to be the best apron yet!" Jonas said.

There's no more reading once you're dead, Søren concluded, feeling rather sad. He'd run out of words, so he drew a picture of a man, a woman, and a dog.

"Adam and Eve?" Jonas asked. "*I* was going to write, 'The easiest way to keep your glasses clean is not to care about them getting dirty.' But that would just look flippant next to yours."

They set the apron aside. The flowers had to be done last, after the rest had dried.

Jonas opened some mineral water.

"Drinking together," Søren mused, "means, eventually, peeing together? Not literally, of course," he added, but Jonas had already gotten out a blank shirt.

"We've got to do another!" he said.

But they couldn't think of anything else to put on it.

"This morning, I had a fart that practically lifted me off the toilet seat," Jonas suggested. "But I can't think of a dignified way to phrase that."

"Me neither," Søren said.

"One thing I'm not sure about," Jonas said, looking over the apron, "is did Adam and Eve even have a dog? Do you want to go and ask a priest?" He sounded very eager.

"OK," Søren said. "But first I have to go to the bathroom."

He did go to the bathroom, but he didn't do anything in there except wash his hands. And when he was done, he did not return to Jonas' room. He felt bad about ditching him, but he wanted to end on a high note. There was no way he

could go on being so clever.

Standing outside Mother's door, trying to work up the courage to knock, he wondered if he were becoming Jonas' new special friend. It didn't seem likely he could have more than one, and he felt sorry for Mag.

In the end, he opened the door without knocking. It was a bit like saying, "I love you," or "You're a real mom." She was lying on her stomach, ankles in the air. Monday was her recital; till then, she'd be resting her fingers, reading the score. In this position, she reminded Søren so much of himself, he ran to hug her with a burst of self-pity she fully returned, rolling over to give him a better angle.

Then she sat up and spread the music over their laps. He knew which piano keys corresponded to which notes, but, running his eyes across the score, he had only the vaguest idea what it should sound like—more a twitching in his fingers than anything else. He hugged her differently this time, feeling left behind. He expected to be pushed away, but she closed her book and said,

"Do you want to start piano lessons again?"

"Yes!" He'd never thought he'd be given a second chance—at least, not so soon. He sat at the piano, solemn with joy, for all his conviction that this wouldn't end well, while she rummaged through her filing bin. The first piece Søren would learn, it seemed, was "Eusebius" from Schumann's *Carnival:* a bit like a math problem, with its seven beats over six, but Søren approached it instead like one of those cliffs you were supposed to jump off, believing you'd sprout wings as you fell.

Mother set the metronome; it went slightly faster than his pulse. Focusing on his left hand gave him rather better luck with the right. He'd heard Eusebius so many times, he was able to give the general impression, just playing by ear, and

sustain the illusion of music for seconds at a time, pulling up with a vertiginous swoop, again and again, just before he hit the ground.

His hands dropped numbly into his lap. Mother seemed to listen closely until the strings had stopped ringing.

"Perhaps," she said, quoting Tranströmer, "we are not without hope."

This was the best thing Søren could hear. After all,

There comes a day when the dead and living change places.

Then, the forest begins to move!

She reintroduced him to Czerny, even giving him the book to keep, along with its handwritten rhythms, which she tapped out with a pencil against the piano's wood. Its scars weren't signs of neglect. She kept saying things like,

"Once you learn the steps of the dance, you can do whatever you like with your arms—*almost*—and it will turn out fine."

"Never audibly coddle yourself; that's not what rubato means."

"No affectation to conceal ineptitude."

But also, "Wrong notes aren't so bad, if you play them well."

And, "It's better to be kind than smart."

Finally, with a sweaty forehead: "Good music is as easy as possible—but no easier."

Søren said he understood.

"Before you go," she said, "choose a duet for us to play at the family recital." In August, everyone was required to put a crown of some sort on his summer. It didn't *have* to be music, but every other option, for Søren, would be admitting defeat. He'd never been allowed to perform with Mother before. He leafed eagerly through her scores, choosing a few solely on the basis of their names: *Sicilienne, Bergamasque, Le*

Jardin Féerique… Mother played them—both parts—as well as she could, and he finally settled on "Le Bal" from Bizet's *Jeux d'Enfants*. For himself, he'd have chosen something Baroque in moll; but with Mother, he wanted something more headlong. It had been so long since they'd had fun.

On his way downstairs—he took them rather fast—he couldn't help glancing at Freja's door again. He heard nothing—which on second thought seemed like the worst thing he could possibly hear, and he realized he'd left his goose eggs on the stove. Either Grandma hadn't noticed them, or she'd assumed their owner knew what he was doing, or she wanted him to learn from his mistakes. The pan was dry. It squealed as Søren rushed it under cold water but, fortunately, it was long past being ruined. The eggs were rubbery and sulphurous inside.

"Bad egg," he said, giving it to Yap, who did not seem to agree.

After Yap's gobbling, the house fell silent. Everyone, it seemed, was hiding. Yap lay on the floor with an introspective air, as if anticipating gas, and Søren stroked his belly. Noticing a paper bag, he felt the urge to set it on fire. He imagined the fire would spread. The smoke, he hoped, would make people fall asleep before they died in each other's arms.

Then he noticed Kai creeping through the hollyhocks. Collecting potato bugs, presumably. When he had enough, he'd pour them on the cement, and jump on them like bubble wrap. Søren hated when he did that. If only he ate them, there'd be less waste.

He went outside to scold him, but Kai was already running into the forest, hiding something under his shirt.

"Where are you going?" Søren shouted. "Stop!"

Really, it was delightful to shout "Stop!" and chase

someone, for once. Kai had a head start, but Søren was taller, and gained on him with every step.

Kai staggered, as if from side ache. The thing he was hiding seemed to have grown.

"You caught me!" he announced as Søren grabbed his arm.

"What's that under your shirt?"

"Nothing!" Kai lifted it, making provocative gestures with his belly, and Søren had to let him go.

When Kai was done laughing, he looked at Søren with more respect than usual.

"Do you want to come and play with Mrs. Dag-og-Nat?" he said.

"It's kind of you to ask…"

"But you're too scared!"

When he was gone, a squeaky voice said,

"There *was* something in his shirt, you know."

"Mag?" Søren said. But it wasn't Mag. It was a squirrel.

The squirrel twirled down onto Søren's head.

"My name is David," it said. "From the story of David and Goliath. I heard Uncle Jonas reading it aloud."

"My name is Søren," Søren said. "Do you know Uncle Jonas well?"

"I watch you through the windows of your house."

"You must have seen some pretty embarrassing things!"

"Not for a squirrel," the squirrel said.

Søren wanted to ask if David had been looking in their windows this particular morning. Instead, he blushed and asked,

"Is it interesting to watch us, then?"

"Most squirrels wouldn't think so," David said. "But I'm not like most squirrels."

"Because you can talk?"

"All squirrels can talk. The unusual thing is that you can understand."

"Well, it's not the super-power I'd have chosen," Søren said. "No offense."

"I bet you'd rather *fly*," David said contemptuously.

"Are you alone?" Søren asked, changing the subject. The rummaging in the treetops reminded him of a curtain about to go up. It also reminded him of the time a horde of angry squirrels had thrown acorns at his head.

"The answer to the question you *should* have asked," David said, proudly stretching his tail, "is *me*. I am the thing Kai had in his shirt. And now I want to thank you for saving my life."

"Will you grant me three wishes?" Søren asked hopefully.

"No," David said, "but I will save your life, as soon as possible. And in the meantime, I will give you this nut, which cures any disease."

"Thank you," Søren said politely. It would have been nice to be able to fly. But then he realized what might be accomplished with such a nut. "Where is it?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't carry it around with me," David said, as if Søren were an idiot. "But tonight, you'll find it under your pillow."

"Can I stroke you?" Søren asked before David could go. "As part of my reward?"

"Well—just once." David swirled onto Søren's knee. "Wild animals hate being stroked," he remarked, closing his eyes as Søren's fingers ran up and down his spine.

Walking home, Søren began to feel feverish. As the day went on, he felt much worse. By dinnertime, his throat had swollen so that he couldn't eat, and by bedtime, his vision was too blurry for him to read. He just lay in the dark, shivering under the blankets, and sweated.

He had frustrating dreams. Once, Grandma took him to the bathroom. He reached out for Mother, but she wasn't there. He looked around. Kai and Eskild were in their beds. The window was open, creaking in the breeze.

There was something in his hand: an acorn, soft with sweat, not quite as golden as he'd hoped. He put it on the nightstand, intending to give it to Freja in the morning. The tip had broken off in his palm. Without really thinking, he put it in his mouth, and immediately fell asleep.

The next morning, he felt much better. Still, he stayed in bed, for consistency's sake, and let Jonas read to him. *Death in Venice* seemed like an odd choice under the circumstances. Afterwards, Eskild played Boggle with him, in a slightly dutiful manner, while Yap, lying at Søren's side, gazed longingly out the window.

Søren didn't remember the acorn until he awoke from his afternoon nap.

It wasn't under his pillow. It wasn't in his hand. It wasn't on the nightstand. He gave Yap an accusing look and ran down to the kitchen, where Grandma was fermenting cheese.

"Did you see an acorn?" he asked.

She looked at him suspiciously. "I threw it away."

He rummaged through the garbage.

"There's nothing to be gained from being sick at this time of year," she remarked.

At last, Søren found it, under crusty batteries, in a pile of auburn hair. He almost popped it into his mouth—every cell in his body begged him to. But his hands were covered with goo, and by the time he'd washed it off, he remembered what he had to do.

"Freja must eat this acorn," he told Mag and Eskild. They were reading comics on the porch, and seemed relieved to

have something more important to accomplish.

Eskild suggested blending it into a milkshake. Søren worried this would destroy its healing powers. Mag suggested daring Freja to eat it—or if that didn't work, daring her not to. Søren approved.

"Your plan is full of psychological insight," he said, but Mag didn't look as if she liked him very much.

Freja was lying on the grass in her new bathing suit, shading her face with a book. She looked so grownup, Søren felt silly daring her to eat an acorn. But she immediately accepted, chewed, then spat.

"Blech," she said apologetically.

Søren tried to rake it up with his fingers, but the acorn had already begun to dissolve. He could only hope it had spent enough time in Freja's body to have some sort of effect. Or perhaps a tree bearing the same kind of acorns would grow up from her spit. But that might take a hundred years! He wanted to scold Freja for failing the dare. But he realized that regurgitation was a sensitive subject for her.

"I've eaten acorns before," she said, "but they didn't taste anything like that. Are you trying to poison me?" She laid her book on the grass and went inside, spitting again into the hollyhocks as she passed.

"I hate it when people spit," Mag said.

"Who wants to go hunting?" Eskild asked.

Søren looked at him gratefully.

"Hunting what?" Mag said.

"Bears?" Eskild said, after a pause.

But Søren knew what he meant. Last summer, they'd almost caught her. Eskild had thrown a rock that bruised her head. In revenge, she'd laid siege to their house that night. They'd gathered in the kitchen, playing hearts, pretending not to hear Marilla, Grandma's cow, who was mooing with

fright. Grandma and Mother were in Molde, so there were no adults around to see the Morra break the glass and bite Freja just below the ribs. In order to pray, Søren had had to close his eyes. When he opened them, Freja was lying on her side in a pool of bile. The stove was glowering over her protectively.

This time, they were better-armed: Eskild had his knife, Søren, the bow and arrows he'd made with it, while Mag held Jonas' ax, at arm's length, as if it were on fire.

"Don't fall," she told herself.

"The fight will be over by the time you can raise that over your head," Eskild said. But she wouldn't trade it for anything. They also took a bag of apples.

Now the question was, which way? Even the wind seemed unable to decide. Søren wished summer on Otterøy didn't smell so much like fall. The aspens shuddered under the fast-flowing light. Eskild chose the path with the most butterflies over it, but it quickly took them into the darkest part of the forest.

"We're heading north," Eskild said, and Søren wondered how he knew.

"I wish I'd brought my jacket," Mag said.

"Do you want to dance?" Søren suggested. "I mean, just to keep warm."

"Quiet," Eskild said, pointing with his knife. There was a yowl, that ended in a purr, that turned into a rattle, as if a cat had just enjoyed doing something bad. When they walked toward it, it began again farther off. They followed it from place to place, and as they went, the branches seemed to close behind them. The earth crunched furtively beneath their feet. Søren notched an arrow, hoping the Morra wouldn't vanish into the wind. But it really smelled as if she'd let them catch her, this time.

He imagined she'd eat Eskild first—who wouldn't?—then Mag. Himself, no doubt, she'd save for last.

What he didn't expect was that she'd choose such an arbitrary moment to step out from behind a tree. Søren let his arrow fly. The Morra groaned and spread her blackness over the ground. Søren was impressed by the strength of Eskild's bow.

"Father Dorsten?" Mag said, bending down. At the last possible second, the creature had changed herself into a priest. He was saying unusually Catholic things as he pulled the arrow out.

"It doesn't look so bad," Søren said. "Just a bruise with a smile."

"I'm going to be late, you idiot," Father Dorsten said, pulling down his sleeve.

"Wait, let me tie a sock around it," Søren said. "Don't go!"

But Father Dorsten went.

Søren looked around for Eskild. Had he hidden from the priest? Of course, there would have been no point in them *all* getting in trouble, but still…

"Oh, dear," Mag said. Eskild was lying in the leaves. He was looking at the sky with an expression of polite surprise. His shirt was covered in blood.

"I think I fainted," he said, "and sort of landed on my knife. Where is it?" He pressed his hand to his head, leaving a smudge. There wasn't much blood, really. It was more that Eskild's shirt had used to be white. Søren helped him take it off. They tied it around his waist.

"My knife?" Eskild asked again. "Where is it?"

But they couldn't find it.

"I'll get you another one," Søren said.

"It won't be the same," Eskild said, which was awfully

nice.

"We're very lucky," Mag said solemnly. Apparently, she meant everything, and as they walked home, they grew increasingly hilarious. By the time they reached the creek, they were all ready to hop in, and let the water clean them up.

"I can't even see the hole," Eskild said, putting his shirt back on. It wasn't even pink.

"We don't want anyone else to know," Mag said, wringing the water out of her socks. Probably, today would be one of the happiest of her life.

"We could swear not to tell," Søren suggested, intending to increase her fun. But it came off a little patronizing.

"There's already so much blood…" she demurred.

Freja was reading *Bonjour Tristesse* on the front lawn. Surely, she was far beyond feeling "left out." But she didn't even look up when Eskild said "Hi," and the rest of the dripping children padded by.

Their secret bound them together for the rest of the day. They played the games from last summer that Søren was already growing nostalgic for: building card houses in the loft, sailing flower boats on the pond, dressing up in their great-great-grandparents' clothes. (Søren thought of his favorite dress as "Wistling's Dirndl.") Then they gave Yap a devastating haircut, designed to prove he was a poodle, and jumped around on the sofa, playing Johann Strauss II at twice the recommended speed. Mag was having so much fun, she put off going to the toilet a little longer than was wise. But there was no spill, hardly any smell, and this was the first day of summer that had felt exactly right.

Still, as Søren lay in bed that night, he realized that hunting the Morra would never be a game again.

CHAPTER XVI
THE CHEF WHO WOULDN'T DIE

GRANDMA'S FAMILY wasn't required to eat together, but you could usually expect to find your favorite people in the kitchen at certain times, so Søren felt a bit desolate, as if he had shown up for rehearsal on the wrong day, when he came down to breakfast and saw no one was there. Hungry, but unwilling to eat alone, he got out Grandma's faded encyclopedia of food, *The Chef Who Wouldn't Die,* and laid it on the table. The photographs were slightly obscene; it was the words that watered Søren's mouth. He skimmed the offal section, then headed straight for milk. Apparently, over 500 million people lived in dairy farming households worldwide. Did Søren count? Although he often got up early enough, Grandma didn't like it when other people milked her cow.

The world was suffering from a glut of milk; as a Dane, *The Chef Who Wouldn't Die* was willing to accept his share of the guilt, and propose international solutions. Scottish tablet,

confiture du lait, dulce de leche, American divinity—Persian "barfi" sounded especially good: just thicken milk with sugar and cardamom, then cut it into bars.

But how did one thicken milk? With a little care, milk could be teased, curdled, stretched, carded, infected, baked, bagged, prodded, molded, melted, or aged into almost any form. It wasn't only cream and water; it was grass and sun and air, the liquid cause, as well as consequence, of every part of a cow, and Søren wanted very much to make his own rennet. But this wasn't easy, especially if you had to wait for Grandma's cow to die of natural causes.

He heard an ominous clicking. Mag was making toast on the stove, standing on a three-legged stool.

"Where is everybody?" Søren asked.

"Picking cloudberries," she said, with a wobble, and Søren realized he'd been left behind.

Jonas came shuffling down the stairs.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

"Cloudberries," Mag repeated, and Søren could smell her toast begin to burn. That was the way she liked it.

"Did you have nice dreams?" Søren asked, then wished he could reel his question back.

"Yes," Jonas said earnestly. "I dreamed I was sixteen, standing outside the house at night. I was singing in a beautiful, brand-new voice. It was even better than flying. I wish I could remember the music. I was just making it up. The windows were open but the lights were off, and I hoped Mom and Dad were listening so they'd realize how talented I was, and not make me go to work or school. I just wanted to stay at home and sing! But when I went back inside, they were watching sports—which was odd, because we've never owned a TV—and Dad looked at me in an irritated way. He was counterfactually fat. Then I woke up."

"Someday, I'd like to have a flying dream," Søren said.

"If you tried harder, you probably could," Jonas said, a little crossly. "Yes, what is it?" Mag was standing at his elbow, looking tense.

"Do you want to read *The Diary of a Nobody*?" she said.

"Sure," he said. But instead of following her upstairs, he went over and stood by Søren. "Whatcha making?" he asked.

"Persian Nougat. But we're missing the honeydew, which is excreted from the anus of an ant, actually."

"*Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"*

Søren smiled cautiously. "Do you want to help?" he asked.

"How?"

"Well, do you know how to thicken milk?"

"It depends on the context…" Jonas looked at the recipe. "I'd just heat it until the water evaporates. You'll want to use a bain-marie. We don't have one, but I can show you how to get by."

"I didn't know you could cook," Søren said admiringly.

"I used to cook all the time," Jonas said. "Back when I wouldn't eat with Dad."

"We don't have any pistachios, either," Søren said. "But there must be a workaround."

"Sunflower seeds?" Jonas suggested.

"We don't have any."

"I'll go to the store." Otterøy Gas Mart wasn't much for groceries, but you could usually find anything that fell under the heading of beer, or smokes, or snacks.

After Jonas left, Søren felt a tugging at his sleeve.

"I wrote something for you," Mag said, handing him a note. Before he could read it, however, Freja and Eskild came into the kitchen, carrying ice cream buckets full of cloudberries—the largest he'd ever seen.

He put off his barfi, since Grandma needed the stove. Sadly few berries were set aside for eating fresh; but they only stayed good a few days. Most would be mashed and frozen, or else made into jam. Grandma got out the aluminum cauldron she used for nothing else, although Søren had once dreamed of her boiling him alive in it. The dream had been pleasant, actually, reminding him of how she'd used to wash him in the sink.

Leaf scraps swirled up between her fingers. She crushed a jade-green spider before it could escape. Dust had given the berries a bluish sheen, but they tumbled onto the towel like orange glass. The drupelets, seen up-close, did look gross—each one had an eyelash—but their seeds were essential to the texture of any cloudberry dish.

Grandma obviously enjoyed mashing them. She poured them into the cauldron with a fluffing sound. When the pectin had dissolved, she added it along with some lemon juice to keep the flesh from going brown. She cooked the berries as little as possible, in order to preserve their taste. But some of the bottles inevitably went wrong. Pulling one out of the cupboard, years later, you often saw a blind eye staring out at you from behind the glass.

Cloudberries were too good for Søren. He felt like he was stealing them even when they were offered to him with sugar in a dish. Freja and Eskild didn't have any. They must have eaten plenty right off the vine. Perhaps they had even fed each other when Grandma wasn't looking. Søren felt sick—or rather jealous and alone. He took Mag's note out of his pocket and read it. He didn't notice any change in himself, but when Freja looked at him next, she said, "Who's that?"

At first, he thought the disease had taken over her brain. But as he looked around, it was obvious the others did not recognize him, either. How mildly they all looked back!

When he saw his reflection in a spoon, it was hard to say exactly how he'd changed. He was still a human boy. His neck was still too long. But his eyelashes—were they supposed to go all the way around?

"I'm Søren," he said, but it didn't sound convincing, even to himself.

Freja laughed.

"I think that's one of the Knudsen boys," Grandma said. "They take after their mother."

"I don't like the look of him," Mag said, her smile confirming that she'd done this to him. He took out her note, but the words had vanished. Mag grabbed it.

"What's that?" Eskild asked.

"Just a poem I wrote," Mag said, and Eskild lost interest.

"It's odd he's wearing Søren's clothes," Freja remarked.

"Where did he get those?" Grandma asked. "Eskild, take him upstairs, and make sure he takes them off."

"*Grandma*," Eskild said.

"They're mine!" Søren said.

"I'll just call his mother and ask her to send them back," Grandma said. "I'm pretty sure he's Rolf."

"Shouldn't he be leaving?" Mag asked.

"I don't want to go," Søren said. But Freja had begun to push him toward the door.

"Give me a hand," she said. Rolf Knudsen was a lot stronger than Søren had been.

When Eskild approached, however, Søren let her close the door in his face. He heard the bolt lock. He hadn't realized his family were so unkind.

But, then, they weren't his family anymore.

As he walked away, the birds sounded unusually loud and sharp. Quite to his own surprise, he ran back and started pounding on the door. He kept pounding until Freja opened

the window and shouted, "Go away!"

"Mag!" Søren said, surprised by his own husky voice. "Tell them who I am!"

"I've never seen him before in my life," Mag said.

Freja started to close the window, but Eskild intervened.

"If you're Søren, prove it," he said. "Do something that only Søren would do."

As Søren stood there, with his mouth open, Freja began to look a little convinced. Then he decided to do his secret dance. Unfortunately, nobody knew about it except for him. Freja laughed. Eskild turned away. At that moment, Mother came down the stairs.

"Mother!" Søren shouted. "It's me!" He pressed his face against the screen.

"What's going on?" she said.

"It's just Rolf, the Knudsen's half-wit son," Grandma said. "They've been letting him wander around. But I don't think he's dangerous."

"Should we call the police?"

"Mother!" Søren said, and began to cry.

"You're *sure* he's not dangerous?" Mother said.

"Maybe he just came over to play," Eskild said.

"But none of us likes him," Freja said.

"Not even me," Mag said.

Kai asked for permission to throw an egg.

So Søren turned and went—toward the Knudsens', he supposed. He had trouble walking: his legs were so out of rhythm with his hands. He had such big hands! But he covered a lot of ground with his big feet, and felt so rejected, it was almost sweet. His tears, mixing with his snot, had a cathartic tang. He thought about the Knudsens' house, with its big yellow porch, and hoped there would be baked goods inside, as well as a kind, middle-aged woman to give them to

him.

He heard footsteps ahead of him on the gravel. It was Jonas, coming back with the packet of sunflower seeds. Søren looked at him fearfully, but Jonas came right up and gave him a hug.

"Hey, Søren," he said, and Søren's disguise fell off like an old coat. "Are you OK?" Jonas asked, stepping back. "You haven't been in a fight?"

"Kind of," Søren said modestly. He heard barking, and they both turned to watch Yip chase the scraps of Rolf Knudsen down the street.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLASTIC SWAN

BEING Jonas' best friend was more fun than Søren had expected. You didn't have to invite him twice when it was just you and him. He demonstrated intelligent self-respect. You could say whatever you thought, even if it was stupid. As long as you liked him, he would never assume anything bad about you. And he knew so many things!—poems, card tricks, sight-singing, Greek.

Apparently, he'd been too squeamish to finish his Ph.D., then too sensitive to hold a job. After firing himself from the fishery for incompetence, he'd been living with Grandma, having a series of nervous breakdowns under the pretext of taking care of her. Mother only hoped he'd be able to take care of himself when Grandma died. Søren could hear her contempt whenever she spoke about Uncle Jonas: the suspicion that he was just lazy, not crazy.

Perhaps he was living the life she'd have chosen for

herself? In any case, his example was a danger. For what would happen if they *all* decided to live on Otterøy forever?

Søren was afraid Jonas would be offended when he asked for his life's story; but it seemed as if he'd just been waiting for the opportunity:

"I was an ugly baby," he said. "I wish I had some photos, but Grandma threw them all away. She said I'd be handsome when I grew up."

"Did you always call her 'Grandma'?" Søren asked.

"Not until after you guys showed up."

Jonas' eyes were almost too blue. But if you looked at any eyes long enough, they turned into bags of goo.

"In kindergarten," Jonas said, "my teacher thought I was brilliant because I knew how to read. It doesn't take much to impress people at that age. She let me reach into the bucket of goodies and pull out one thing. Most boys would have hoped for a peanut butter cup, or a die-cast car or something; but I knew there was a plastic swan in there, and rummaged around until I'd pulled it out. My heart almost stopped at the beauty of the thing."

"What happened next?" Søren asked.

"The kindergarten burned down. No one was killed, but Mrs. Lindbo lost her long, blonde hair. As a consequence, she went back to school to become an accountant."

"How sad," Søren said.

"It was so beautiful!" Jonas said. "Every child wanted to be buried in it. It was the main reason she was such a good teacher. But I kept the swan in my backpack, hidden in socks. I'd learned it inspired jealousy, and I did everything I could not to make the other students jealous. For instance, I stopped being able to read in public, or do math problems on the board. Our family was very rich at the time."

"Didn't you fail your classes?" Søren asked.

"My brains always returned in time for tests. So I made it to middle school with the reputation of an idiot savant. I had no friends. But I had my swan."

Søren couldn't quite see the point.

"Did you never have any friends?"

"Well, at university, maybe. That was the first time I'd ever left home. I was so happy to leave," he said bitterly. "As if there were something important about growing up I still hadn't done."

An exalted expression came into Jonas' eyes. Søren could feel a rant coming on.

"But at university, even more than at school, it was unacceptable to be serious about art—let alone to love it. You had to pretend to read comic books, watch television, play video games, and listen to popular music, all the while viewing great literature, like knowledge itself, as another scheme devised by white men in order to oppress you. For a 'minority literature' course, I wrote my entire term paper in two hours on the bus, intending it as a parody of the identity politics formulas we were being trained to use—how subversive novel A challenges stereotypes about marginalized group B, all the while exposing the hypocrisy of power structure C. I heaped on the praise for the hero-victim, and scorn for the bigoted bourgeois. But, apparently, I was a little too straight-faced. When I got my paper back, the professor had written, 'A+! Come to my office and let's talk about getting this published.' Even back then, sadly, it was usually true that the humanities were just for people who weren't smart enough to do math. The faculty were the kind of people who had never gotten over their teenage preference for poetry that doesn't rhyme."

"I thought you studied math."

"I switched when it became apparent that a piece of

Gorgonzola cheese could get a Ph.D. in the humanities if it were willing to say the politically correct thing for long enough. By contrast, in mathematics, it was refreshing to be asked actually to think. You might spend hundreds of hours on a problem, or ten minutes, it didn't matter; the solution, when you found it, would be the same. It belonged to the universe, as well as to you. We still used formulas, but now they were true. It was the rare mathematician who did not believe in God.

"Of course, there was pressure to view even math as created, not discovered. But, happily, hard science could not be thrown out in the interests of cultural relativism or diversity without bridges collapsing and airplanes falling out of the sky. Sure, there was the occasional guest lecture 'toward a feminist physics,' but everyone knew it was a lie."

"It *would* be nice to be able to read at school," Søren remarked. "But no one else seems to mind…"

"To lose your sense of art's religious significance," Jonas said, "is to lose your ability to perceive the value—or even the existence—of the thing you have lost. I didn't mean to imply such harms are less serious than airplanes falling out of the sky. It's just that they're invisible to the liberal mind."

"How did math help you make friends?"

"I took a class from a Canadian specialist in modern algebra. Unlike my literature professors, he read books in order to understand and enjoy them, not scold them for disagreeing with his politics—or worse, praise them for appearing to agree.

"He invited me to Thanksgiving dinner with his family since he knew I was interested in all things foreign. I began to haunt his office hours, since he seemed to enjoy my company. This was something no one, except on rare occasions my mother, had ever done. As his graduate

student, I helped him study Lagrangians, Hamiltonians, and Mandelbrot sets—a very cool and careful form of prayer, like reading a poem ought to be. We took weekend trips to sights of local interest, which, as a local, I'd never seen before. For instance, there used to be this lead soldier factory in Molde that made the most delicious ballerinas, bears and things. Professor Shaw had a huge collection, and sometimes we'd play together after class, or at his house in the evenings."

"What was his first name?" Søren asked.

"It doesn't matter," Jonas said. "To answer your question, Professor Shaw is—was—my only grownup friend. I mean, besides Grandma, and books. Unfortunately, I had to drop out of school soon afterwards. I hated teaching—all those skeptical eyes. What did they expect me to say?"

"I think you would have been a great teacher," Søren said.

"He wrote me a letter," Jonas said, "about a year later, trying to persuade me to return. But I didn't reply. Even if he was Canadian; well, he had a wife and kids, and I wasn't cut out for teaching. There are limits to how far a teacher and his students can profitably disagree. Besides, Grandma had already taken me back. There may be no such thing as friendship," Jonas said firmly, "but there *are* family ties.

"Still, Grandma was disappointed when I showed up on her doorstep! It seemed to me, then, as if she'd never have given birth to me if she'd known how I'd turn out. Ever since, our relationship has never really been the same."

"How sad," Søren said, feeling horrified.

"I put on Grandpa's work clothes and applied for a job at the fishery. It was across the canal from my old elementary school, and I remembered admiring the men through the chain-link fence during lunch."

"Why'd you get fired?" Søren asked.

"I kept calling my boss' views reductive. That's something you should never do. It was after he'd joined the book club I'd started, largely in order to impress him. He discovered I was a reactionary at heart."

"A reactionary?"

"Yes, if I had my way, there'd be no cars, no computers, no airplanes. No asphalt, no fruit out of season, no reason to wander more than twenty miles from the place you were born. Wars would be decided by champions in single combat, who'd receive their rewards ahead of time. Mothers would prefer their children to their office jobs. Instead of reading scripture as literature, we'd read literature as scripture. Instead of politics, we'd have religion. And instead of religion, we'd have politics—the separation of church and state would be complete. As Wistler once said, 'the source of the greatest evil is trying to create heaven on earth; trying to be worthy of heaven hereafter is the source of the greatest good.'

"Notice he didn't say '*all* evil,' or '*all* good.' Perhaps *some* developments deserve the name of progress. I'm in favor of eyeglasses, for instance, and stained glass. And I'd be glad to take antibiotics, if it came to that. But I think history took a sharp turn for the worse, in general, with the invention of the printing press. People ought to love books enough to write them by hand, on skin. And I'm definitely opposed to public education—nobody ought to be forced to read. As for democracy, well, I suppose it's the best you can do with no God to choose your king.

"But, mostly, I got fired for being not very good at my job. It was the same as with teaching—I hated feeling incompetent. Anyway, the whole place closed down soon after I left, since it was cheaper to ship the fish to China for fileting, then ship them all the way back.

"But, you know, I'm still so happy, every morning, not to have to go back! I wake up, full of bliss at the thought of never having to speak to anyone who hates me or the things I love. Professor Shaw once told me that he always grew tired of summer vacation after a few days; too much freedom turned his joys into boredom, his love for God into self-contempt. The only kind of happiness was work, he said.

"Well, maybe he was right, for some people—for most people, even. But not for me… Did you know I've written twenty-seven books, some of them quite good, and never tried to publish any of them?"

"I'm sure you could have if you'd wanted to," Søren said. "Did you like your boss at the fishing plant, too?"

"I don't think *that* was the issue," Jonas said, and Søren wondered if it was time for him to leave. "Wait," Jonas said. "I've got a present for you." He took something out of his pocket. "Close your eyes and open your hands."

At first, Søren was afraid it was going to be a mouse. But it was just the plastic swan. It wasn't nearly as lovely as he'd imagined, but it was easy to act overwhelmed, for Jonas' sake. Still, he knew his favorite thing would continue to be the stegosaurus Eskild had carved.

"Now, tell me about *your* life," Jonas said, a little insincerely, perhaps, but Søren tried to come up with a truthful reply. He knew there ought to be something about piano lessons in it, as well as Ms. Lund, Cynthia de Vere, cinnamon buns, Tchaikovsky, Eskild…

"I don't know," he said, and was kind of surprised that Jonas chose that moment to give him a hug.

But it felt nice.

Mag knocked on the door. You could tell it was her just by the sound.

"What are you guys doing?" she asked, and Jonas said

they were getting ready to read *The Magic Mountain* out loud.

Søren stayed to listen, even though it was obvious Mag wanted him to leave. He began to make a habit of listening to Jonas read. After a week or two, Mag accepted his presence. Sometimes, instead of reading, they'd tell each other stories in a certain way: Jonas would devise a plot, say, "The cat eats Mother's wedding ring," and they'd spend the next hour or so writing different versions of it, then read them out loud.

In Søren's version, for instance, of which he wasn't very proud, the cat was fed an emetic that made it vomit up the ring. It was shinier than ever, and made Mother and Father love each other forever. Jonas said he had a practical turn of mind.

In Mag's story, having a wedding ring in its stomach made the cat fall in love with the she-cat next door, and sing obnoxious ballads under her window at night. So Mother took the cat to the vet, who x-rayed him, found the ring, and cut it out. But the ring had shrunk so that it would only fit the cat. He offered it to the she-cat, who married him, but she died, giving birth to their first litter. The cat then died of complications from his surgery. The whole time she was talking, Mag seemed to be aware she was trying too hard to be sad, and this made her sort of angry.

In Jonas' version, Mother was so beautiful, if she weren't wearing her wedding ring, she suffered proposals from every man she saw. So when the cat swallowed it, Mother's only option was to wear the cat himself on her hand. Fortunately, he was very small and enjoyed being held. He purred and charmed everyone, except for the people who were better off being scared away. And as Mother practiced the piano, the cat also learned to play. It would even help her by dancing on the back of her hand in an extremely musical way.

"With the help of the cat, Mother's playing grew better than ever. She became a star. Gradually, she became aware of a certain man who sat at all her concerts in the middle of the front row. His eyes filled with tears whenever she executed the tenderest parts of a Schubert sonata in her distinctively feline manner. Many times, she tried to speak to him after a concert, or invite him to her house for spaghetti. But even the Sensitive Man was repelled by the power of her cat. It wasn't the smell—Mother made sure of that. It was more like magnetic repulsion; he couldn't even talk to her on the phone without the receiver being forced away. When she opened his letters, with her cat's retractable claws, the ink ran right off the page.

"The only solution was to get rid of her cat. The only way to get rid of her cat was to divorce her husband. They had no children, and had always slept in separate rooms, so this was morally OK. Then, the cat relaxed his grip on her arm, coughed up her wedding ring, and ran away to play. He could never even be made to sit on Mother's lap again, although he continued to love her very much.

"So Mother went to see the Sensitive Man in his apartment. She had great expectations, and he had a well-loved piano, which in this case was not a euphemism for *crappy*, or *abused*. He asked her to execute the tenderest parts of his favorite Schubert sonata in her distinctively feline manner. But things started to go wrong right away. Mother's hand, without the cat dancing on it, kept landing too soon, too hard, or not at all. It slipped off the keys as if they were greased, or stuck to them as if they were covered with glue. Her playing was far worse than inept: only a truly expert pianist, possessed by the devil, could have played so *demonically*, parodying the music, revealing the emptiness within.

"She kept playing as long as she could stand it, then lifted her hands to her face and wept. The Sensitive Man made sympathetic noises. He told her it was probably just a virus, an illusion, a fluke. Surely, her talent had not resided in her cat! But she would not be comforted. And she looked rather ugly when she cried. He took her by the arm and guided her to the door. She never saw the Sensitive Man again, and she could hardly blame him. The music she had made was the most horrible thing on earth. Forever afterwards, she would suspect that even the greatest music was just a farce, a cat dancing on the back of someone's hand. So she gave up music, and became a veterinarian's receptionist, at which she was rather good. The end."

"Now that's sad," Mag said, and seemed to be trying to cry.

Søren laughed.

Jonas seemed pleased. Søren was careful not to flatter him, these days. He could tell that just by being himself—of all things—he was "winning" against Mag.

His piano lessons continued to go well. He practiced every day, and made enough progress to please Mother almost every time they met. He both dreaded and looked forward to Fridays, when they'd play "Le Bal." She seemed to believe that dire consequences would ensue if they did not perform it perfectly at the family recital.

Søren thought it was strange how little he missed Eskild this summer. Eskild and Freja were spending so much time together, some days Søren didn't see them until it was time for night games—and some days not even then.

CHAPTER XVIII
SØREN PRETENDS TO BE THE HOLY GHOST

ONE DAY, Eskild said something that really hurt Jonas' feelings. It was just,

"I wouldn't spend so much time around Uncle Jonas, if I were you."

As luck would have it, Jonas happened to be entering the room at that moment. Given one more second, Søren might have been caught mounting a vigorous defense; as it was, he just looked guilty, while Jonas paused, his hand on the knob, and looked back. Then he left.

"I wish you hadn't said that," Søren whispered—the closest he'd ever come to scolding Eskild.

"Well, it's true," Eskild whispered back.

Søren wondered if Eskild could possibly know what had happened in Jonas' bedroom that morning. He'd been lying

on the rug, practicing a ghost story he wasn't very good at. The curtains were billowing, Mag wasn't there, and Søren felt as comfortable as if Jonas were a character from a favorite book.

"The Thing tried to look like what you wanted most, but in disguise," Søren said. "For instance, to one girl it looked like a delicious candy bar, but when she ate it, she got pregnant, because what she truly wanted was a child. Unfortunately, her baby turned out to be a monster. But only she could see this. To other people, it looked like the most beautiful baby in the world; they thought she was a terrible mother because she did not seem to love it, even though, instead of going to college, she got a horrible job in order to be able to feed it, and she did her best to take care of it until she got old and died. Then the baby gave a very nice talk at her funeral. But it was still a monster, inside."

"How do you recognize the Thing?" Jonas asked.

"Most people can't," Søren said. "That's why it's so dangerous. One day," he confided, "I made the Thing and gave it to Eskild."

"What did it look like?"

"A sort of boat, with emerald sails, ivory oarlocks, and a fire opal deck."

"It sounds lovely."

"Eskild put the Thing on the sea and it sailed away. Then he went inside for cinnamon buns and never thought about the Thing again."

"That wasn't very nice of him."

"It didn't matter. Because as soon as the Thing touched the water, it became a fish."

"Ah!"

"It swam until it smelled a creek. Then it swam up the creek until it saw a boy with pure white hair. He was sitting on a

rock. His name was Olle, and he was deaf."

"Poor Olle," Jonas said.

"Olle caught the fish and ate it before it could offer him any wishes."

"Did he even cook it first?"

"He was going to," Søren said, "but as soon as he picked it up, the Thing flowed into his throat. Then his voice became the Thing. It was the most beautiful voice in the world. It lured a bunch of children to it. They became Olle's friends—the only ones he ever had. They took Olle to the top of the mountain, hoping that if the Thing jumped out of him there, it would have nowhere to escape to, and they could catch it."

"Did they bring a jar?"

"But there was a hole in the top of the mountain, and it went right down into the center of the Earth, and when Olle said 'Wow!', his voice jumped down it like a star. They watched it shrinking and shrinking until it went out."

Jonas was silent.

"Is that the end?" he asked.

"Well, there's been no sign of it since," Søren said.

He laid his head on Jonas' stomach. The curtains flattened against the glass. He thought he could hear Jonas sleeping, and he waited a few more seconds.

"Jonas?" he whispered.

"Yes?" The rumble came at once.

"I think I found it."

"What?"

Søren propped himself up on his elbow.

"Jonas?"

"Yes?"

"Can you close your eyes for a second and pretend I'm the Holy Ghost?"

"Of course."

Søren leaned down, as if to tell him a secret, and kissed Jonas' cheek.

"Sorry!" he giggled.

Jonas smiled, but kept his eyes shut. Søren lay down again, but now it just felt as if Jonas were waiting for him to leave. So he left.

It was a little embarrassing, but hardly a big deal, he thought. Until later when Eskild said, "If I were you, I wouldn't spend so much time around Uncle Jonas."

CHAPTER XIX
IN THE HALL OF THE SQUIRREL KING, PART III

GRANDMA didn't seem to worry much when Jonas missed dinner, but when he wasn't there to be tucked into bed at night, she made some calls: first to the priest, then Jonas' old boss—apparently, his name was Ivar—then the police, who said it was too early to consider Jonas a missing person.

So Freja led the children out to search. Søren tried to sneak away in order to ask the squirrels for help, but Freja shouted, "We don't want you getting lost, too."

First, they checked the mountain. The hole was full of chocolatey water. If Jonas were in there, how long would it take for him to float to the top? They were looking for a stick to poke around with when a light appeared. It looked like a dragonfly and they chased it down to the coast.

They followed it from rock to rock. Now and then, the

light was swallowed or broken by the waves. But it never came to rest, not even in the grotto Jonas had used as a cave before the ocean gnawed a hole in the floor and sucked out all the sand.

They searched the cedar grove, the bluet meadow, and the potties at the construction site, but never picked up Jonas' scent. Occasionally, Eskild climbed the more promising trees, while Freja encouraged him to go faster, and Søren circled anxiously below. It seemed he felt even guiltier than Eskild.

They knocked on Mrs. Dag-og-Nat's door, but she didn't answer. They listened for nervous birds, but heard only the usual coo. They visited Otterøy's one-room library and discovered that Jonas was entirely unknown to the internet, which made Søren kind of glad.

The next morning, Mother turned on the radio. Eventually, a man announced that Jonas was missing, but he didn't sound as if he cared.

Aunt Siv drove up for the day, bringing groceries. She, Mother, and Grandma retired to the kitchen to confer. Freja got furious at Kai for eavesdropping on them, then asked him what they'd said.

"They think Uncle Jonas did something bad," he said, and smiled.

While the adults were out looking for Jonas, the kids stayed home and pretended to relax. It was a long day. Freja and Eskild read on the lawn. Søren tried to join them, but he couldn't read with so much sun. It felt like a competing pair of eyes, impatient for him to turn the page. Down by the shore, Kai and Mag were building a sandcastle. Kai looked so gentle, absorbed in this game.

When the grownups got back that night, Grandma said that Jonas must have decided to run away. He'd come back

when he was ready. It almost sounded like he'd done this before. She and Mother went straight to bed. Søren wondered if they weren't actually glad Jonas was gone. He was quite grateful that Aunt Siv, at least, stayed up to cry.

Passing by Jonas' room, Søren couldn't resist the urge to go in. He sat on the bed for a while, glancing at the treasures on the nightstand, then reached under the bed and pulled a journal off the stack. "It would take longer to read my journals than live my life," Jonas had said, showing Søren where they were hidden. Obviously, he'd been hoping Søren would read them, but Søren never had. Frankly, he'd had better things to read.

Now, he felt a little nervous at what he might find. The most recent entry was just a dream:

"Mother and I were driving into the fells for a picnic, and I noticed for the first time a well-known phenomenon: when the moisture in the air freezes into a single pane of glass, high above your heads. On cloudy days, you couldn't see it at all. But on a sunny day, like this one, it glittered with feathers. Also, a statue of an angel—or possibly an actual angel—lying face down on top, radiating cracks. I realized the danger of chunks falling on us as the whole ceiling began to shatter. I asked Mother to let me back into the car, but she just laughed, and said that whereas female nudity was disturbing, male nudity was merely comic.

Later, I was driving the same car through Molde, when the brakes failed. I zoomed around town, terrorizing the locals, who eventually, maliciously, ganged up to stop me with the help of a police helicopter on top of the mountain. How ashamed I was! It wasn't my fault. My grandparents' money and influence managed to hush the whole thing up, but I was banned from driving (forever). On the whole, I was glad about this. What a relief never to have to leave home!"

Underneath, was a cartoon of an archaeologist, inappropriately touching a mummy. "You're only as old as you feel," the caption read. Next, a mole sat in front of a gilded mirror, wearing a powdered wig, applying a cosmetic mole to its cheek. "Perhaps more charming if English were your native language," Jonas had scribbled. It made Søren feel sad.

"Wistfulness," he read, "the look of a person caught in an unexpected flash photograph, seems to be the natural expression of Søren's face." He flipped eagerly through the rest of the volume, but there were no more occurrences of his name. In fact, most of Jonas' journal seemed to have nothing to do with his daily life.

"Really," he'd written, "it's unfair how people expect you to participate in the here and now, when books give you access to the *there* and *then*—whose depth exceeds the present as the flesh of an apple exceeds its skin."

Søren put everything back just the way he'd found it, then curled up in Jonas' blanket. He'd only intended to stay for a few minutes, but it felt warm and smelled good, and he fell asleep.

It was raining the next morning when Søren came downstairs. Kai was playing under the porch swing. Grandma was staring out the window. Aunt Siv had gone back to work, and Mother was sleeping in. It seemed like everyone had given up.

Søren took Grandpa's big green umbrella out of the closet, put on his galoshes, and went out into the rain to look for Jonas. He probably should have eaten breakfast, but at the time he didn't mind having a light head. The pines hissed and gave off an exciting smell. Distant thunder gurgled. Søren could only guess where the sun might be. He headed

for the top of the mountain, where the police helicopters had been.

He didn't run across any animals for so long, he began to fear something was wrong. Then he saw a fawn: almost white, with pink fringe along its thighs. It moved so slowly, Søren felt as if he'd been turned to glass. But when he stepped toward it, the glass shattered. The fawn flipped its tail and trotted off.

Søren had to run to keep up. He held his umbrella like a lance. The fawn led him into the center of the island, as far as you could get from anyone's house. The leaves here were so large, they kept out the rain. The fawn sauntered towards him, swinging its head. But when Søren stroked it, there was a flash. When the lightning faded, he was fondling a dogwood tree. His hand was still hot from its breath.

The sunlight had turned silver, and thick mist was curling out of the grass. It twined itself around two baskets. The note on the white one said, "For Safety," while the note on the red one said, "In Order To Find What You Seek." Both notes were unsigned, but the handwriting looked trustworthy, and Søren took a mushroom from each basket and weighed them in his hands. He spent so long trying to decide between them—only later realizing he could have taken both—that he forgot which was which. He threw them both away, intending to get new ones. But now the mushrooms were all shriveled and slimy. He looked around for the mushrooms he had discarded, but only found one of them. Fortunately, it was still in good shape.

He headed downhill, but the mist held him back: at first like water, then like clay. It pressed his chest, climbed his neck, fingered his lips. Preparing to force its way in, it grew slimy, which allowed Søren to slide his arms up and pop the mushroom into his mouth. It tasted like chocolate, but didn't

melt, and as he chewed, his stomach began to bubble. His throat burned. A burp—smelling of apples—sent the mist away. It swarmed at a distance, as if against glass.

"Thank you, mushroom lady," he said.

As he wandered, the mist slid around him like intestines, making a marble pattern against his breath. Here and there, tiny bolts of lightning flashed: yellow, green, or pink. He kept his ears open for squirrels, but could hear only the squelching of his feet. And then "Lord, Now Let Thy Servant Depart" from Rachmaninoff's *Vigil*. The rumbling in Søren's stomach supplied the bass:

> *Lord, now let Thy servant depart*
> *with Thy word—in peace.*
> *Thou hast placed salvation in the eyes of all people,*
> *a light in the opening of Thy tongue,*
> *a glory for Israel.*

I-iiiiiiii-srae-eeeeeeeeeeeeeel!—Søren followed the last word like a ribbon through the mist. It was getting crowded with Wisps. They'd slide into the corners of his vision, kaleidoscopically, whenever he tried to look at them head-on. Stumbling over a rock wall, he landed at the bottom of a giant oak. The Wisps were congregating in its branches, no longer shy—yet beautiful; Søren felt sure they'd sting him if he stayed. So he ran, hopping over the wet spots in the lawn. Some of them looked deep enough to drown in.

Like a ship through the fog, the church came nearer. The rose window felt warm, even though it was wet. He leaned against it, watching a face. It was beautiful, but it wouldn't let him in. He was afraid of breaking the window, anyway. So he walked around to the front of the church. The pear trees were in bloom. Olle was sitting in one of them, singing. His

shorts and t-shirt were as white as his hair, and he'd pulled all his eyelashes out. Søren could imagine how satisfying it must have been.

He returned Søren's gaze without either smiling or breaking off his song, which sounded stranger and stranger the longer it went on. For instance, those last three notes—Søren was pretty sure Rachmaninoff hadn't intended *that*.

"I want to talk to you," he said, but Olle made a gesture that seemed to indicate terrible things would happen if he stopped singing.

Søren made an exasperated noise, then put his hand on Olle's leg, and began to feel safe. There were no cracks in Olle's voice, no threads rubbing bare. It was a voice which could carry your whole weight, and he leaned against the tree, and closed his eyes.

He was jerked away from sleep by the sound of a car door slamming. Then grownup shoes. Mrs. Dag-og-Nat and Father Dorsten, arm-in-arm, were walking toward him through the pears. She was wearing a black veiled hat, and saying how absurd it was to put a Dag-og-Nat in jail for killing an actor. He was patting her arm and promising to see what could be done.

They walked so fast, Søren had to run to keep up. He kept making polite sounds, trying to catch their attention, but they seemed unable to hear. Finally, Father Dorsten made the sign of the cross, and turned to the right, while Mrs. Dag-og-Nat went left. Instinctively, Søren followed her. He hadn't actually talked to Father Dorsten since the time he'd shot him with an arrow.

As Olle's song faded, the rain began to pierce the mist. Mrs. Dag-og-Nat raised her walking stick, which turned into an umbrella, and Søren took shelter underneath. She welcomed him by putting her hand on his shoulder, and

stopped at the Gas Mart for milk and a lottery ticket.

"Will you pretend to be my maid? No—wait here," she said, handing him her umbrella. She came back with a ticket for him, too, and they used a coin to scrape off the tape. Søren hadn't won anything, but Mrs. Dag-og-Nat had won a cell phone. According to the small print, it would be inconvenient to claim, but she still seemed pleased.

"Will you join me for dinner tonight?" she said. "My grandson will be there. Perhaps he can help me with the phone."

"I'd love to," Søren said honestly, "but I'm looking for Jonas. It's my fault he ran away."

"Oh?" Mrs. Dag-og-Nat said. "You'd better take this." She removed a tube from her handbag and twisted it, creating a surprisingly bright beam. "It's an LED," she said. "It was meant to be for my grandson. But you need it more than he does." She didn't seem surprised when Søren kissed her hand.

He jogged along the coast, around the mountain. It was easier to climb up its back. The Wisps were after him in droves. They'd ride in on waves, and jump off as they broke. The "Whale's Spout" showered him as he passed. Wiping his eyes, he felt pain slide down his arms. Green, pink, and yellow, they looked more like mosquitoes than fairies. He tried to shake them off. Their wings shattered, but they didn't let go.

He ground his back against a pine, raising a horrible squeal. Something came off in his neck. He tried to feel the problem, but it was made of many parts. His hand came away covered in blood. Reassuringly, most of it was yellow.

Søren didn't have much time to wonder *why* they wanted him dead. Their attack seemed more like malfunction than revenge. Perhaps they just liked the taste of his blood. He

kept throwing them away; but no matter how hard he threw, they'd circle back. He began tearing them in half, cutting his hands on their shells. But soon it became obvious he was going to have to run. His feet seemed to pick up energy through the ground, as if from buried rails. He knew exactly which paths to take and which logs to jump. He felt pretty certain, now, that he had not eaten the mushroom designed to keep him safe.

With a flash of hope, he discovered Jonas' swan. It was still in his pocket, and he threw it at the Wisps. But nothing magical occurred. It just fell to the ground.

After the Wisps had taken a chunk of his ear, and a slice of his cheek, they began getting stuck in his hair, which gave Søren time to think: or rather, to sing: not Olle's song—"Nunc Dimittis" would have been grotesque under the circumstances—but "Senta's Ballad," which came out with astonishing volume and speed:

Yohoho-hay! Yohoho-hay! Yohoho-yohoho-hay!
Have you seen the ship with the blood-red sails?
On her bridge stands a snow-white man.
He watches the wind as it howls, "Whee-hee!"
and cradles his pitch-black plan.

Yohoho-hay! Yohoho-hay! Yohoho-yohoho-hay!
The ship flies on like an arrow—no rest.
Hell's bells chime it on till the day
when truth shall be found in a feminine breast:
Pray heav'n she may love him alway! Alway?
Pray heav'n she may love him alway.

The beauty of his voice seemed to come from himself, not the mushroom. It made him believe he'd possessed this

talent forever, and just never had reason to discover it.

The Wisps backed off, as if from a flame. The nearest one began to hum. It quivered, brightened, then burst. The others shrieked as they did the same. To make the last one shatter, he had to strain. Finally, it popped, in a ruby plume. He couldn't see through the sulphurous fume. He seemed to be warbling through a curtain of blood. If only he'd had lessons! His technique must be bad.

He coughed into the grass. The Wisps tasted like mango and other foreign things. He looked up into the Morra's cave. He could hear it spooling—a seashell sound. You could only find it when the Morra wanted you to. Søren and Eskild had found it once before. It smelled rather like Jonas, and Søren entered of his own free will. All her victims did. He tumbled gratefully into the dirt. It was just the right temperature, as soft as flour. It soothed his wounds, and began sending him to sleep.

Happily, something bit him on the ear, right where the Wisps had mauled it. He sat up with a croak, intending to yell, and banged his head, which made him still. When he was capable of motion again, he no longer felt like sleeping. He crawled until he was able to stand. The mouth of the cave was gone. The perfect blackness made him think of Mrs. Dag-og-Nat—her flashlight! But it wasn't in his pocket. He laughed hoarsely: how such a small accident might spell his death. Without much hope, he began to grope around.

"Don't crush me," a shrill voice said, and shined a light into Søren's eyes.

Søren picked up David, along with his flashlight, which was contaminated. The handle shook, and he seemed to hear distant chimes.

"One of those bugs got stuck inside," David said. "Hope it never gets out! It reminds me of those *****ing vape

pens… I'd lock it in a drawer at night. You're quite the nightingale, by the way."

"Thank you," Søren said, "for saving my life"—a line he was overjoyed finally to be able to say in real life.

David climbed onto his shoulder.

"I'll take you to the kingdom of the squirrels," he said. "But let me do the talking. The last person I took there, my sister Leda ate his eyes."

"Squirrels have such lovely names," Søren said.

As he walked, he could feel David's heart against his neck. He reached up to stroke him now and then, but David didn't bite.

When they came to a fork in the tunnel, it was hard to choose: each way smelled equally bad.

"What do you think?" Søren asked.

"Shake the flashlight," David said.

The Wisp blazed lime green, and its color ran down one tunnel, filling the arteries of the rock. Søren followed it up winding stairs, down creaking ladders, and over silent bridges. At every crossroads, it seemed to know the way.

David wasn't so sure.

"We ought to be there by now," he said. "I don't want to get caught in the mountain after dark."

"How can you tell when it's dark down here?" Søren asked.

But David didn't answer.

They reached an arch carved with acorns and ducklings. As the light filled it, David said a password, and two shadows Søren hadn't noticed before placed their weapons on the ground.

"Would they really have eaten my eyes if I'd gotten the password wrong?" Søren asked.

"Yes," David said, but Søren suspected he was joking.

Surely, it would take more than two squirrels to deoculate him, if he decided to put up a fight.

The tunnel shrank until he had to crawl. David rode inside his shirt to avoid being scraped off. Søren liked the way this felt.

The sound of water grew louder. They emerged into a chamber with a giant pool. The light flowed up a bridge that disappeared into a waterfall on the other side, casting lime-green ripples over the walls.

"Ah!" Søren said. It was beautiful.

"What's that noise?" David asked.

Søren couldn't hear anything but water. But there *was* a strange wetness spreading over the rock—like a coat of scales. It turned green or purple when touched by his light.

It was spiders. They spattered as he ran. He expected to find a fascinating mess on his calves, but the waterfall rubbed him hard and threw him down on the other side. It sounded different here, and everything smelled clean. His hands and knees were raw, but he couldn't find a single bite.

"Were they poisonous, do you think?"

"They only come out at night," David muttered. "Let's not follow your flashlight," he said, as Søren stood up.

But there was nothing else to do. The green light led them up a staircase around a well so deep, Søren's footsteps seemed to fall forever. Yet the stairs went even faster up than down. They seemed to rise beneath his feet. After so many circles, Søren lost track of time. Fossils from a furless world hunted each other through the stone. They turned green in Søren's light, and blinked.

Finally, he reached a double door, huge in relation to David, who ran up the wood, rapping here and there on an acorn or a duck. After a click, the doors swung outward—no problem for David, who stood right between them, but they

almost pushed Søren off the ledge. He teetered for a moment, then pitched himself forward, landing smack in the middle of the squirrel king's banquet hall.

It could be nowhere else. The scarlet pennants and mullioned windows were unmistakable. The stars, reflected in the silver cloches, were the only source of light, and David ran down the table, peering under each dish.

"I suppose it's safe to eat…" he said.

Søren's place was larger than the rest. A notecard said his name and "Please, don't wait." He waited anyway.

"Go ahead," David urged.

So Søren made a lake of soup, in which he laid an island of mash, and launched some crackers, shaped like tiny boats. Everything seemed to be carved out of nuts, even the sails, rigging, and little pirates. The imitation acorns and pumpkins were made of marzipan.

There were also spiders, fried—"We don't like them when they run away," David apologized—curling oak leaves, made of cheese, and a platter of cutlets, shaped like butterfly wings. Søren took five or six at a pinch and arranged them along the lip of his plate. One stuck to his thumb and he sucked it off, marveling at the fruity flavor of the meat.

The instant he swallowed, the candlesticks and chandeliers blazed with light. Every place along the table, all the way down to the king and queen, was occupied by squirrels, dressed in fabulous brocades. Harps and swords hung at their sides. Tiny, brass-capped horns swung around their necks. Marmitons with pitchers in their hands seemed eager to meet one's every need. Underground, they looked more human than they did in trees—almost as if they had taken off a disguise.

A very red squirrel with a black harp began to sing:

Hear, once there was a king
with much treasure to his name;
but the jewel he loved best
was his daughter Hermeline.
Hermeline Rose!
Hermeline Sun!
Hermeline—everything lovely.

The knights in armor mirrored
her father's cheerful hoard;
in verse they all competed
to spread its fame abroad.
Hermeline Rose!
Hermeline Sun!
Hermeline—everything lovely.

Hordes of suitors came a-flocking,
attracted by the noise;
they pressed their suits in chorus
and wept like little boys.
Hermeline Rose!
Hermeline Sun!
Hermeline—everything lovely.

But the Princess chased them from her;
her heart was cold as steel.
She didn't like the way they talked
or how it made her feel.
Hermeline Rose!
Hermeline Sun!
Hermeline—everything lovely.

The King puffed out his chest. In a small-deep voice, he said, "Thusnelda, appear," and Thusnelda did, in the alcove behind him. Sadly, she wasn't the actual "Hermeline Rose," but she was very pretty. Her wedding dress was made of one of Grandma's handkerchiefs, and her bouquet was made of clover. She looked scared.

"For too long, our kingdom has lived at war with its giant neighbors," the King said.

"Most of them haven't noticed," David muttered.

"But today I would like to forge the first link in a chain binding us to the human race with ties of love and friendship."

"Ties or links?" David said.

The other squirrels were whispering so distinctly, Søren could understand them all at once:

"…much too tall…"

"…offspring would make the mirrors break…"

"…is he even old enough?…"

"…the grandson of Mrs. Dag-og-Nat, I heard…"

"…spat the fruit right on the ground…"

"…a beautiful voice, anyway…"

"…I'll believe it when I hear it…"

David bit Søren gently on the wrist.

"Your acceptance speech…" he prompted.

Søren stood, banging his knees on the table, and half the squirrels' drinks fell over. He said a few words, but his voice, after its last song, was too hoarse to be heard. He knew better than to wait for the squirrels to stop talking. But what else could he do? He tapped his knife against his glass. It broke. The squirrels laughed.

"Here, drink this"—David handed him another glass, and Søren could tell it was nectar, even though he'd never had nectar before. It soothed his throat, and he said,

"Dear squirrels, I'm honored." He looked at Thusnelda, who was obviously sacrificing herself for the good of her race. This was probably the sublimest moment of her life, and he was sorry to ruin it for her. "But I am unworthy of your trust," he said.

A squirrel or two booed.

"Please, hear me out. I'm unworthy of the fair Thusnelda, because I'm too young and too stupid. For instance, if Thusnelda were sick, I would probably spill her medicine all over the ground. And if she loved me, I would probably make her want to go and kill herself."

"Shut up, shut up!" David hissed.

"It's just that humans and squirrels are too different," Søren said. "For example, in terms of size. It's just not right, however beautiful it may seem."

He felt ashamed, as if he were saying things he did not really mean. Yet he was certain that a marriage between him and Thusnelda could only end in disaster. He tried to look forgivable, but when the King pointed his scepter at him and said, "Squirrels, bring me his head!", everyone streamed toward him in a living carpet of fury.

"Help me, David!" he said.

"Die, traitor!" David said, and ran up to Søren's ear, as if to stab it with a fork. Instead, he whispered, "There's a secret passage behind the King."

Søren looked in the wrong direction.

"Behind the tapestry!" David said, and drove his fork deep into Søren's hair.

The tapestry behind the king depicted a squirrel in armor skewering a dog through the roof of its mouth. Søren could see no way to cross the floor without crushing squirrels under his feet, so he ran across the table, kicking dishes out of his way. The candles set the tablecloth on fire, and as he

reached the far end of the table, he sent the wedding cake flying, one layer after another, into the King, plastering him against the wall. Thusnelda, weeping, fled.

"I'm sorry!" Søren said, charging through the tapestry without even stopping to make sure there was a hole behind it, first. The cloth scraped over his head. It fell heavily down his back, muffling the roar. He felt as if he'd passed through another waterfall. But his legs were not covered with frosting, this time. Or rather, this time they *were*. He ran a finger down one calf, and tasted it. He regretted not being able to stay and eat more. It *would* have been nice, surrounded by admiring eyes, to learn the beautiful secrets of the squirrel kingdom. But Thusnelda—well, he probably would have crushed her in his sleep.

He smelled smoke. Presumably, the tablecloth was burning. As he ran upstairs, the smoke grew so sour, it made him cry. The soles of his sneakers began to stick. But, gradually, the air cleared. As it cooled, Søren slowed down. He turned his flashlight on. The green spiraled up around him. He was going the right way.

Climbing, he had lots of time to think. He wished, for instance, that David had been a swallow instead of a squirrel. And he wondered whether he were *really* trying hard enough to save Freja's life. Would a potion of his own blood, for example, produce a cure? Or a certain kind of mushroom? There seemed to be a mushroom for everything. If only he could find that woman again…

The walls grew rougher, with occasional slogans in charcoal or red paint:

The problem with me is I was loved too much as a child.

Pity is the purest form of respect.

Earaches are probably caused by worms.

It looked as if Jonas' soul had fallen down the well,

leaving skid marks on its way. Søren felt sure he would find him, now; but not in what condition.

Suddenly, he reached the top of the well. For hours, it had been shimmering above him, a starry circle; now, it swelled around his head, and burst. He gasped for air, and Jonas helped him out.

"I'm glad you didn't drown," Jonas said.

Søren coughed.

"The longest I can hold my breath is five minutes," Jonas said.

"Is that what you were doing when we came looking for you before?" Søren asked.

"Yes," Jonas said.

"I knew we should have poked around with a stick."

He couldn't think of anything else to say. He didn't think either of them was taking their reunion seriously enough.

Yet he didn't feel awkward. You could let Jonas' conversation fall for minutes or hours and it would still be bouncing when you picked it up.

"How far down did you get?" Jonas asked.

"Not sure," Søren said. "I was more concerned with coming up."

"Your voice is so beautiful!" Jonas said. "So low…"

Søren coughed again.

"Is it time to go home?" he asked.

"I guess," Jonas said. "It's so pleasant up here."

The birds sounded more carefree than usual. The sun had come out just in time to set. It seemed to be melting under the clouds, which were strangely heavy, and there were these funny particles in the air. It almost smelled as if there'd been a storm.

In fact, Søren remembered, there had.

When he couldn't keep his shivering to himself any

longer, Jonas stood up. They walked down the mountain, hand-in-hand, until Jonas let go and began to whistle.

Søren wished he weren't so wet.

"Everyone will be happy to see you," he said.

"They will, won't they?" Jonas said, and they both laughed.

CHAPTER XX

CHINK

THERE wasn't much praise for Søren when he got back. Grandma seemed to think Jonas had rescued *him*, and Søren just said, "The mountain," when anyone asked where he had been. This didn't happen often. Tact or jealousy kept the cousins quiet, while Mother seemed to think it would be indulging Jonas to make a fuss.

The next morning, however, she gave Søren a silver metronome and made him sit by her while she drew up the program: "The Family Recital," it said, in blackletter and gold. Now everyone had to decide what he was going to do, or at least give it a name.

Grandma said she was going to sing the Marseillaise. Mother said it was difficult for a non-professional to do that without sounding drunk.

"What if I get drunk?" Grandma said.

"That would be great," Mother said.

"I wonder if anyone's hero is Napoleon anymore?" Jonas said.

"Mag, what are you going to do?" Mother said.

"Read a poem," Mag said.

"Title?" Mother said.

""The Beautiful Lady,"" Mag said. "It's based on you."

"Søren and I will be playing 'Le Bal' from *Jeux d'Enfants*," Mother said, "Kai will be jumping high, and Jonas will do his head trick. That leaves just Freja and Eskild. They usually put on a play, but one of these days someone really ought to write a musical about chess. Søren, will you go suggest it to them?"

"OK," he said, glad to have an excuse to butt in. They were lying in adjacent deck chairs, turning competitively brown. Each looked five years older than he had in June—especially Freja. She'd never had a boyfriend before.

No, they weren't interested in writing a musical about chess, so Søren went to the parsonage to see if Olle was willing to come over and play.

Olle wasn't sure. Søren had to promise that Mother wouldn't make him sing. She'd been trying to get him to perform in public with her, despite the fact that he couldn't read music and was almost incapable of learning new songs. But he reeked of talent; so Mother said after hearing him improvise in a way that to Søren just sounded wrong.

For Søren and Jonas, though—in private—Olle would sing medleys of Wagner and Grieg, cowherd songs and Disney musicals, especially *The Little Mermaid*. His presence allowed Søren and Jonas to spend whole days together without feeling embarrassed. They hardly even had to speak.

Rather, they'd speak through Olle, competing for his attention, laughing at his jokes. They laughed awfully loud, it seemed. But Olle was unused to being the center of attention, and never got tired of being wooed.

Today, however, he'd brought the New Testament with him. He said he had to finish it before night fell.

"What happens when night falls?" Søren asked, but Olle just went straight through to Jonas' room, somehow making it obvious he didn't care if Søren followed.

So Søren went to read *Silas Marner* with Mag, for a change—not out loud; just in the same room. But after a few minutes, she said she'd rather be alone.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said. "It's just that my imagination doesn't work around you."

He tried hanging out with Grandma, but apparently her imagination didn't work around him, either. She only laughed when he said,

"I, too, would like to knit sweaters for the poor."

So he practiced the piano for an hour, then another. If the recital went well, after all, Mother might not fire him at the end of the summer.

He laid his cheek on the tablecloth, next to an empty glass. The patio, with Freja and Eskild on it, was dazzling. Freja was marking up her script, and Søren suddenly pitied her so much, he went outside to help—rehearse, he guessed. She looked up as he approached.

"Is there a part for me?" Søren asked.

"Yeah, the bitch from hell," she said.

Eskild looked amazed.

"Sorry," Freja said. "I don't know why I said that."

"It's OK," Søren said.

"There's a part for Søren, right?" Eskild said.

"I guess he could be Chink…" Freja said.

"Who's Chink?" Søren said.

"A hole in the wall," Freja said.

"Great!" Søren said. "What are my lines?"

"You don't have to say much," she said. "Just stand there,

and we'll talk through you."

They talked through Søren for about an hour, but they didn't say much. Still, he enjoyed being within range of Freja's smell. There was something sisterly just in her letting him stand so close.

She had a grand manner that suited her part. Eskild didn't even try to act, which showed off how good he was at being himself. He'd obviously never liked *Søren* this well, and afterwards Freja said casually, "Did you know Eskild and I are getting married?"

Eskild looked away.

"Not *immediately*," Freja said. "Maybe next spring…" She squeezed Eskild's hand. Marrying your cousins was aristocratic; it implied there was no one else good enough. The Dag-og-Nats, for instance, had kept their beauty to themselves for generations, manning their own chamber orchestra as long as they'd been born with enough fingers to play in it. Mother had ecstatic memories of hearing them play.

"Congratulations," Søren said.

"Well, we're done rehearsing now," Freja said, and Søren took the hint and left.

He went back to Mag's room, even though what he wanted more than anything was to be welcomed, and found one of Jonas' journals on her bed. Probably, she'd been looking for loving references to herself. It was even newer than the one Søren had read. Almost the first entry said,

"I don't know what subconscious affection drew me to this youth who, after all, intellectually was still a boy and whom I had to teach the simplest things of everyday life, particularly concerning hiking, and who could offer me nothing intellectually through which my horizons could be broadened and elevated; it must have been simply the image

of complete goodness and purity which I daily learned to love and revere all the more in him."

Søren blushed, although he realized it was just one of many quotations from *Der Nachsommer*. Still, he couldn't help thinking they were all about him:

"I couldn't stand it either if someone made an object into something other than what it really was. This was particularly true when I felt that the object had become worse for the change."

"There are plants which because of their nature or size, as for example mushrooms or trees, cannot be pressed into a plant book."

"Telling someone that something is beautiful doesn't always mean giving him possession of its beauty."

As Søren turned the page, the bookmark fell out. On it was a note by Mag, announcing that she had run away. It began with another Stifter quote, in her own handwriting—"Let's discuss the insects' tininess. Let's discuss their great numbers. Finally, let us discuss the inaccessibility of insects"—and was so full of smallness, unloveliness, and jealousy that, after reading it, Søren was almost afraid to look in the mirror. Jonas had been her "Eskild" for years—the reason it was possible to live through school. And then Søren had come along…

The poem stopped where the paper did, as if the reader were expected to know the rest. He folded it back up. When did she write it, and how far could she have gotten since then? He took the note to Grandma, and asked her to call the police. But Grandma interpreted it quite differently. Mag would come back, she said, when she got hungry, or scared of the dark. Who knew how many times she had already run away that summer without anyone noticing? She was just like Grandma as a child…

Mother didn't seem any more concerned. She stroked Søren's head and said they would find time to worry if Mag weren't back in time for bed.

"I wonder who's going to run away next?" she said as Søren closed the door.

Finally, he asked Jonas for help. He was a little surprised to find Olle's New Testament lying face-down on the floor.

"Already finished?" he asked. Olle was gluing feathers to a bird.

But who had applied the glitter mustache to his face?

Jonas made the same objections as Mother and Grandma, but Søren could tell he really cared. He must have realized that he was partly to blame.

"Should we call the police?" Søren said.

"Let's do our own search, first. Are you coming, Olle?" Jonas said.

"Ingvar," Olle said. "Oh, I thought you were asking the name of my bird."

The island was too big to search everywhere, so they checked the usual places first: the cowshed, the church, the quay where Mag liked to watch the ferry go by. "It's odd that I don't know exactly where she'd be," Jonas said, wiping the sweat from his eyes. Then they checked the unusual places; but there were too many of them. Just getting to the top of the mountain took forever, and as they stumbled back, the sun was already turning orange, and Søren realized that Mag was not likely to have a very nice time alone that night.

He chirped discretely into the trees, hoping to attract David. When the others asked what he was doing, he said he had to pee. Then he actually did. When he got back, Jonas was sitting on a rock with his hands in his hair.

"What are you looking for?" Olle asked.

"*Mag*," Jonas said. "I wish you'd say when you can't

hear."

"Oh. She's under the sink," Olle said. "At least, she was there this morning. But she didn't want to be found, so I put her back." He threw his paper bird. Apparently, it flew well enough for him.

When they got home, Mag was sitting on the counter, helping Grandma grate potatoes. Grandma didn't even seem to remember that Mag had been missing. But Mag looked embarrassed when she saw Jonas come in.

"I read your note," he said, sitting next to her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you would find me."

"*I'm* sorry," he said. "I should have known."

"I just stayed there for a few hours. It smells so nice under the sink," Mag said.

"I know," Jonas said.

"But, after a while, I got tired of being gone. Especially when no one seemed to have noticed."

CHAPTER XXI
SØREN AND ESKILD SWIM WITH DOLPHINS

SØREN HAD a pretty good idea who was going to run away next. He'd found a roadmap in Freja's anorak. On it, she'd circled a town famous for its church. Although Eskild may have agreed to marriage hypothetically, Freja would characteristically want to work it into her real life.

Søren would have told Mother, eventually, but he didn't want to ruin their piano lessons: the only confidential time they shared. Afterwards, she'd stroke his hair and tell him about her favorite CDs, or how kind his father had been. She might even reminisce about university, that "spiritual abattoir," scene of many triumphs as well as slights.

Then she'd listen, for a minute or two, while Søren talked about his friends, or the swallow chick he was raising. He worried what would happen this winter if it didn't know how

to migrate. Mother believed it would hibernate in the mud at the bottom of a pond. Søren found this reassuring.

On Friday, Mother drove to Molde for her dress rehearsal, and the children waved her off. She always brought back souvenirs.

That night, while Søren and Eskild were putting on their pajamas, Eskild seemed to have something important to say. But he waited until the lights were out, then came to sit on Søren's bed:

"Freja and I are going to steal Grandma's car."

"Kai might hear," Søren warned.

"That might not be so bad…"

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"And when are you coming home?"

"She hasn't said."

Søren thought for a moment.

"You'd better take sandwiches," he said.

"Tell Grandma."

"To make sandwiches?"

"No. To stop us. But don't tell her I told you. If Freja found out…"

"I'll say I read it in your journal."

"I don't keep a journal."

"Well, I'd be lying anyway."

"Right…"

Eskild picked at the quilt for a while, then went back to bed.

"It's for her own good," he said. But Søren didn't reply. He'd never thought that Eskild would ask him to lie.

He tried to dream about getting a dog, choosing all the details beforehand. Her name would be Bramble, for she had snarls and thorns…

Instead, he dreamed that Mother had died. The pain when he discovered it was *her* the grand funeral was for—they'd just dumped her pale body out on stage—was so intense, he thought he would die, literally. The emotion seemed strong enough to cause a heart attack, and he rolled around, groping for a breadknife or something to impale himself with, and wailed.

When he woke up, his throat was as hoarse as the time he'd saved Jonas' life. His heart was racing and he couldn't catch his breath. He saw that Kai was looking at him, and he tried to smile. But Kai didn't smile back. He looked more than usual like a cat.

Over breakfast, Eskild kept looking at Søren. Probably, Søren looked as though he had forgotten. He usually did. But after the others ran off to play, he lingered in the kitchen, watching Grandma gather gardening supplies. She was making cuttings of Wistling's Roses, which were always in short supply.

In order to put the awkward revelation off, Søren tried to finish Grandma's crossword puzzle. It was hard, because sometimes she put more than one letter in a box. Sometimes, she used words Søren did not believe were real.

Reify?—just the sound of it made him want to puke.

"Grandma?" he said. "I read in Eskild's journal that tomorrow they're going to get married and steal your car."

She could hardly misunderstand this, but for a while she seemed to try. Then she put down her knife, went over to the rack, and pocketed her car keys.

Afterwards, she went right back to work. Apparently, nothing else needed to be said, so Søren went outside.

Freja and Eskild were hunting butterflies. They hoped to suffocate them in a jar then pin them to a board, Freja

explained, but they hadn't caught any yet. Jonas' net had a hole in it, and while Eskild tried to knot it with his fingers, Freja sat on the front steps, writing down facts about all the butterflies she planned to collect. She even let Søren watch. She was as gracious as love could make her; if only the whole summer could pass like this, lit by the secret knowledge that tomorrow you'd be gone! Still, after a few minutes she asked Søren if he wouldn't like to go and catch a butterfly for her, and he wandered off to do so with his bare hands.

Wistling's Roses, as usual, had almost as many butterflies as petals on them. But Grandma was aerating their roots, and Søren didn't want to get too close. The birch grove was full of powder-blue butterflies, but they were so small, they seemed to pass right through your hands. At last, he found a big orange one, lying in the dust. It made a lazy attempt to get away, but Søren said,

"I'm sorry, but Freja needs you more than you do."

He peeked between his palms to see if it was angry, but it just seemed to be dead.

Freja was delighted with the butterfly—her first. She pinned it to a blank square, since she wasn't sure about its name.

For a second, Søren thought he saw his own name on the board. But it was just stray letters among the scientific words.

The next morning, at breakfast, Freja must have had several hours to come to terms with her disappointment, but she didn't look like it. Søren could imagine her waking at five, smothering her alarm, carrying her suitcase carefully down the stairs. Perhaps Eskild, hoping to get caught, would have let his thump. But she couldn't get mad at him *today*.

It would have taken her a while to admit the keys were missing. They'd been hanging in the same place all summer,

every summer. Had Grandma gone somewhere at this unholy hour? No, she was in her bedroom, gently snoring. Freja would have sneaked in and checked the top of the dresser. She probably didn't think—or else she would have dared—to search the pockets of Grandma's pants, lying crumpled on a chair. Or was Grandma's snoring just an act? Perhaps she'd sat up in bed, turned on the light, and given Freja some sound advice.

One way or another, gradually or suddenly, the grim truth must have set in: today was going to be just another day, not the beginning of her new life. The sandwiches Eskild may have been making would definitely have gone back in the fridge. Would Freja have gone back to bed? Perhaps she'd have taken a walk with Eskild along the beach. But what would she have said? Let's have a different wedding, closer to home? But the whole point—or at least half—must have been to run away. And even if she couldn't guess the extent of Eskild's treachery, she must have been able to see how relieved he was.

He was still pink with relief as Freja dropped her dishes into the sink and left.

"So," Eskild said. "Do you want to go hunting?"

"Me?" Søren said.

"No," Eskild said, "each other."

Really, one couldn't feel too bad for Freja on a day like this. The willows were full of bows—so smooth, right after being skinned! The vincas were full of strings, and the river bristled with arrows that sailed both straight and far, carrying just enough force to establish who was dead.

Our Father, which art in heaven, Søren said.

He and Eskild took turns as predator, the less desirable part. Prey got thirty seconds' head start, to run, or hide, or find some more tantalizing way of putting off the moment

of death. Later, they'd play opposing armies: Russians and Finns, Nazis and Norwegians, musketeers and the cardinal's men.

But today they caught the Morra's scent almost at once. Her pacing seemed just right: no sounds until there'd been plenty of smells, no sightings until they'd heard enough to be sure—it was really her! Her playfulness, letting them get closer and closer, seemed to promise she'd show herself in the end.

She'd clawed up both sides of the river, obviously vain about her tracks. Still, Eskild explained how she must have swum to hide her spoor. It was important to pretend *they* were hunting *her*. Besides, Søren loved it when Eskild explained things.

But the tracks faded into sand. The birches shrank and thinned. Soon, Søren emerged onto a marvelous little beach; perfect, really, except for the barbed wire. But it wasn't hard to get around.

"Why'd she bring us *here*?" he asked, shading his eyes.

Freja was lying on a towel, her book fluttering in the breeze. She looked as if she wanted to kill them.

To protect Eskild from her silence, which was pooling up fast, Søren said,

"Do you come here often?"

"It *used* to be my secret," she said.

"Speaking of which," Eskild said, and while they talked, Søren wandered off. The surf made it easy not to eavesdrop, but now and then he looked back.

At first, it seemed like Freja had forgiven Eskild. She leaned in, smiling. The next time Søren looked, however, Eskild was leaning back, and Freja seemed to be asking the same question over and over again. Søren hated when she did that.

She stood up, brushed the sand off her legs, and Eskild held out her towel. She grabbed it and left. After she'd been gone for a reasonable amount of time, Søren went over and sat by Eskild. He was drawing circles in the sand.

"Do you want to swim?" Søren asked.

Eskild looked at the sky.

"Sure," he said.

It was the most fun they'd had all summer. They hadn't brought any swim trunks. The waves billowed around them, almost warm. At one point, Søren thought he saw a turtle. They chased it to the mouth of the fjord, where it vanished among the rocks. If it had minded being chased, Søren reflected, it could have gotten away sooner. While he rested on the outcropping, Eskild dove.

"Dolphins!" Eskild said.

"Where?"

Søren had been on the lookout for dolphins almost since he was old enough to know the word. Even from a distance, he could recognize their twinkle and foam. It was hard to tell which way they were going—until it became obvious they were coming this way, fast.

They didn't *quite* let the boys ride on their backs over rainbows of spray; but they did come close enough for Søren to see their tourmaline sides, black humorous eyes, and deeply creased cheeks. Their teeth were yellower than he'd expected.

There was something soothing about the way they tore the sea open then zipped it back up again. Søren wasn't quite sure if he could hear them sing. Perhaps he'd just never listened closely to the ocean before. It rattled and popped, rising over his ears. Somewhere, deep in this carbonated world, a lid had come off. He'd never treaded water this long, and was surprised at what a good swimmer he'd become.

Even after the dolphins were out of sight, he didn't feel tired, and raced Eskild back to shore. Surprisingly, he won.

Ordinarily, he'd have gone home right away. Nothing could beat dolphins. But today, instead of bottling up his happiness, he let it spill. It took no courage to linger, for once, chasing and dunking Eskild, digging a city of canals, making underwater speech bubbles. The boys revived their old secret language, and even added some new words. For some reason, it was important to have many different forms of *to be*.

Even after they got home, Søren and Eskild remained together, reading on the porch swing. *Otello* thundered faintly through the glass. Søren hoped Grandma was in a state of exaltation. He shivered and smiled, *Leave it to Jeeves* in his hands, Eskild's feet in his lap. The birds were in a very different humor from Renée Fleming; but every beautiful voice, today, seemed like Søren's own.

Freja spent all day in her room. She didn't even come down for night games, and Søren knew he should be worried. But instead he just felt glad.

CHAPTER XXII
SØREN AND THE BUG FUR QUEEN

WITH ONLY three weeks left before school began, Søren was having trouble coming up with an acceptable method of killing himself. The trouble was, you couldn't practice, and failure would be so much worse than not to try at all. Hanging? He'd just dangle. Guns would be great, if Grandma had them: a bit like pressing your "off" button. Knives were too scary, insecticides too crude… Drowning seemed like the best bet—swim out until you couldn't swim back. But Søren was such a good swimmer, it would be hard not to save himself.

In the meantime, he tried to fit in as much reading as possible. After all, there was no more reading once you were dead. He reread Eliot, Lagerlöf, Dickens, Stendhal, Dinesen, Jansson, Undset, Andersen, Mann… He read so fast, unlike Mother, because he didn't have to set the book aside at the end of each sentence to think. He had no qualms about

letting such authors think for him. If only suicide could be like this: dissolving into a world where you did not exist, but all your favorite characters did! Perhaps there *was* reading after you were dead—even if there was nothing else.

In any case, after leaving Moominvalley for the last time, he decided to get serious about curing Freja. It was the only important thing left for him to do. He invited her butterfly hunting, in order to retrace their steps. She'd been so happy last time! And if all went right—for instance, if they caught a butterfly who granted wishes; or more realistically, a squirrel—then perhaps she'd reschedule Eskild's wedding for a later date—say in eleven years—and invite Søren to arrange the flowers, or decorate the cake. He'd have to stick around for that.

Strangely, he didn't have to explain much of his plan before Freja agreed. She threw down her Marguerite Duras, and invited everyone to come, even Grandma, who had her own net.

It was a bit late for butterflies, perhaps—the uglier bugs were already up and about, and most of the wings they glimpsed were dishearteningly small. But Freja promised the big one was always around the next tree.

Given her charisma, it was surprising how fast everyone fell away, as if struck by invisible darts. First Mag, fording the river, stopped to look at something—a wounded fish? A golden ring?

"Go on without me," she said. "I'll catch up."

But Søren could tell she was going to squat there for a long time.

A few minutes later, Olle tripped on a root and let go of his balloon. Up it went, from branch to branch, until it got stuck. Surprisingly, it didn't pop. It seemed to be filling with sun. Olle started to climb, but the third branch broke. He

landed on his back and burped. He didn't want to get up.

"You guys go on," Jonas said, brushing a needle out of Olle's hair. "I'll get Olle's balloon."

"We're going that-a-way," Freja said, pointing with her whole hand.

"I hope you guys catch up," Søren said.

"Thar she blows!" Freja said, and ran.

Søren was unable, and Eskild seemed unwilling, to keep up.

"She'll head home after she catches her butterfly," he said. "She'll want to put it in the fridge."

"I really don't think we should split up," Søren panted. Could Freja really catch a magic butterfly without him?

Meanwhile, Kai was peeling off some bark. He was obviously looking for bugs, and Søren couldn't help watching for a while before he intervened:

"Stop it! That can't be good for the tree."

But Grandma said,

"Leave the poor child alone. Can't you let other people have fun?"

So they left Kai there, peeling, and went in the direction Freja had gone.

Half an hour later, they were in the island's tawny center, climbing among its ribs. The halberd grass, through sun and mist, looked like mammoth hair. Even the wildflowers here were grey, and there were no butterflies of any sort; yet Grandma continued to climb. Obviously, she saw something the others didn't.

Yes—there, in a dripping niche, were the mushrooms. They looked almost ready to take flight. When Grandma reached for one, Søren half-expected it to bite. It tasted like fresh bread, she said.

"I haven't had these since I was a girl. My grandmother

used to say they only grew on Otterøy, but that sounds like wishful thinking to me. She also said they're only toxic in large quantities. Anyway, she lived to be ninety-nine."

Grandma swallowed her mushroom then yawned. "You two go on without me," she said, lying down, and Søren took up her net.

Holding it, he felt a hum, as if a giant bee were near—too low to hear, but it made one's eyebrows quiver. Surely, the Morra couldn't be after them again so soon?

"One of us should stay with Grandma," Eskild said. She looked awfully comfortable in the moss.

"She can find her own way home," Søren said.

"That's not what I meant," Eskild said. He picked a mushroom and sniffed it.

Søren was about to tell him not to bite when he glimpsed the Butterfly.

It slid away over his eye, as if his sight itself were pushing it. Fumbling and catching it again, he was able to see it just well enough to give chase, while the rest of the world—mostly sun and leaves—broke into pieces of kaleidoscopic glass, and spun.

Søren felt dizzy. Fortunately, the Butterfly was leading him through the softest part of the forest. Wherever he fell, the black earth caught him. The trees were all deciduous. The logs were covered with moss. It reminded him of the back of Karen Blixen's house; there'd been scorch marks there, too, along her grave, and Søren could imagine how nice it must feel, sinking your roots into burned soil—just a little too hot!

The trees' arches repeated themselves, smaller and smaller, in branches, limbs, and twigs. Light drizzled through their leaves, so thick, Søren could almost catch it on his tongue. The next time he saw the Butterfly, it looked almost

as substantial as a fish.

But also like a rabbit, kind of. He could get a good look at its wings, now. They flapped as heavily as towels. Pinned to Freja's board, they'd have just looked drab—if you'd been able to see them at all. But, in motion, they gave off every color, from shot silk, to burning coal, to oil on water and sunlit snow.

He emerged into the meadow, as if the forest were a bubble that had popped. The flapping stopped. The asters and bluebells spilled their haze across his feet. Somewhere in the woods, he'd lost his shoes. His toes curled into the grass and he fell into its coolness, as if into flour. The bluebells looked much bigger from down here. A veil of pollen lay between him and the sun. The breeze sent ripples through its light, and Søren had the urge to throw a stone, to watch it rise—or sink. But he was too sleepy…

In the distance, he heard Grandma's favorite song: *Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja!* It was getting nearer. But it wasn't Olle this time. It wasn't even human:

I'm always happy, catching birds,
so happy and so funny,
because all the birds are mine.
Everyone loves this about me.

What I really want, though, is a net for girls.
I'd catch them all and lock them up
by the dozen—they'd all be mine!
Then I would always be happy.

I'd trade one for sugar
and one for a feather bed.
I'd give sugar to the one I liked best;
I'd put it in our bed.

Stomach full, she'd fall asleep.
I'd rock her like a child.
I would be her little husband and she would be my wife.
Then we would always be happy!

The Bug Fur Queen landed on his knee.

"I love you," Søren said.

"How long," she said, "have you been waiting for me?"

He reached for his net. But it was gone.

"Fifteen years," he said, and started to cry.

The Bug Fur Queen settled on his chest. Lighter than a dachshund, she was just the right size to be hugged, and her wings weren't easy to crush.

"Don't I look familiar?" she said. Her proboscis was obviously for nectar, not blood.

"You *do* look a bit like Mother," Søren said.

"So do you," she said lovingly, and explained that she had married his ancestor, Ardafax, in the year thirty-six B.C. "You and your siblings are his only surviving heirs."

"Freja will be so glad!" Søren said. "Heirs to what?"

"Have you never wondered why you are able to talk to squirrels?"

"Not as much as I should have," Søren confessed.

"And that's not the only power you possess."

"Can I fly?"

"No. But you can sing more beautifully than anyone on Earth."

"I *used* to. But I think I destroyed my voice while rescuing

Uncle Jonas. Don't I have any other powers?"

"Yes, four. But don't get too excited; not all of them are necessary."

That sounded promising.

"In what way?" Søren asked.

"You'll have to find out for yourself! And then—if you survive—you'll come home to me. Forever. I wish I could help you more, but I'm too old."

Søren saw that this was true. As she laid her head against his neck, she may have still been alive. But the next time he stroked her, she had definitely died.

He intended to take her body home to Freja, but on his way out of the meadow, he tripped and it flew out of his hands. A hole opened in the earth and swallowed it. Unfortunately, it was too small for Søren to follow, and he watched sadly as the dirt came cinching back together.

"Forever!" he said.

CHAPTER XXIII
SØREN DROWNS

NOW only two weeks were left before school, and death had begun to appear in disguise: Mother's bust of Sibelius, or Yip, who might open her mouth to speak, making Søren freeze until he realized it was just a yawn. He couldn't do anything without meeting its eyes. Olle and Jonas said they understood, but they never had to leave Otterøy, themselves. Eskild might even be looking forward to going. Freja was spending so much time on him these days, he often seemed no better than a chair.

School was like death in so many ways: the halls, the echo, the smell. The way people looked right through you—if you were lucky—as they passed by. Even the worst night's sleep was better than the best school day. And perhaps there were no nightmares for the dead. Perhaps they were reborn into a more carefree race: reptiles, say, or dandelions. Perhaps they didn't exist at all! The only sure feature in Søren's theology

was the Bug Fur Queen, whom after all he'd actually seen. But he had no idea where she'd gone.

He hardly slept at all that night. Everything deserved attention: crickets, waves, Eskild's snore. As soon as it was light, he grabbed a towel, for appearances' sake, and warmth, and walked to Freja's beach.

Here, too, everything was remarkable. Why did the sand feel like that? Why were all the waves heading toward the shore?

Ahead of him, the mountain's shadow ended in a blaze. It gave him something to aim for. But he kept looking around. Every rock or shell was interesting, as long as it was wet. Even his legs became beautiful, inch by inch, as his whole body turned to stone.

With a gasp, he let himself in up to his neck. He did his best Australian Crawl—he felt as if someone were watching—but soon reverted to breaststroke, preferring to keep his head above the waves as long as possible.

His towel shrank into the sand. The forest shrank into the land. It looked like a blanket, dropped in front of the sun.

As he left the mountain's shadow, the ocean cleared. After a moment's vertigo, he found footholds in the glass. He could swim forever, it seemed. But he decided to give sinking a try.

He kept his eyes open. The ocean didn't sting. It looked greener underneath. The sun was strewing petals like mad, but he preferred not to look down. He knew he'd try to save himself when he ran out of air. He tried to breathe water, to hurry things up. But he couldn't. He returned to the surface, giddy with relief.

He swam a few more minutes, then dove again. He kept going until his ears ached, and he could almost see the floor. But, just when he thought he couldn't possibly make it back,

his lungs began to reel him up. For a while, the surface only seemed to be getting further away; but he made it, of course, and enjoyed some truly delicious air.

He was *basically* done with suicide for the day, but decided to swim out just a little more. The wind was picking up, and the water was getting rough. The island looked worryingly small.

But not *too* worryingly. As he headed home, he had time to change his mind several times regarding what he wanted for breakfast, before he realized that, although the island was sliding southward, it wasn't getting any larger. He realized he was caught in a current—the mighty Gulf Stream itself?

Long ago, he'd read what to do in such a situation. But he couldn't remember if it was to swim at ninety degrees to the shore, zigzag, or just tread water and let the current take you where it wished. He tried each strategy for a while, but not long enough to see if it really worked.

Then he got scared, and simply aimed for land. He had to keep veering, though. The island just seemed to be getting further away. He felt exhausted, already, but guessed that he'd have to get much more exhausted before he could drown.

The sun hurt his eyes. There seemed to be a sun riding on every wave. His arms were too heavy, the water too thin. It kept turning into air, dropping him a few inches at the end of every stroke. He had a strange view of himself, as if from above: small and calm. He tilted his head back to keep his face dry. The water tickled his lips, pulled at his hair. He saw a seagull flying by.

The waves got sharper. They seemed to be aiming for his mouth. They didn't taste very good. He began to flounder, and gathered his strength; but his final effort dispersed without catching fire, and his next breath was all water.

Coughing did no good, since he was already submerged.

He felt as if he were struggling with blankets, on the verge of waking up. But in reality, he knew, he was hardly moving at all. The last of his breath fell upwards, like pearls coming off a string. He was surprised by how dark the water had become. The surface, an oval, shrank and shrank. For a while, it was impossible to do anything but watch it glow.

Then he looked around. This world was so much larger than the one he'd left behind! There seemed to be at least two horizons, between different layers of haze. A jellyfish drifted by. It was hard to determine whether it was the size of a whale or his thumb. It was odd that he should notice such things when he ought to be dying of oxygen deprivation. He closed his eyes. At first, this seemed to make him sink faster. Then he could no longer feel the water at all. Was he already dead? If he'd known dying would be this easy, he'd have done it before. Somehow, he was breathing again. His breath smelled like rain. As his body settled into the sand, he sighed, but no bubbles came.

He opened his eyes. Of course, there was no way to be certain, but he felt pretty sure he wasn't dead. If he'd been dead, there'd have been less water—or more. Or it would have been more numinous, somehow… He stood up, sliding to the bottom of the dune. It was steep. It was fun! Really, breathing water was as easy as air. Easier, in fact—he'd never had anything to compare it with before.

He felt so graceful, it was impossible to regret having failed to kill himself. As a sea creature, he would never have to go back to school! "School," he giggled, as some silver fish flashed by, "would have to come to him."

The ocean loved him. Fish loved him. Dolphins loved him. Sharks loved him; even though he hadn't met any of them yet, he felt sure they would show no contempt for

opera or George Eliot. He began to feel so lovesick, he even missed human beings. He'd have kissed Ms. Lund if she'd showed up then, or at least helped her to the surface. His first wish, having become a mermaid, was to save someone from drowning.

His second wish was to eat. He'd never felt so hungry. He'd never felt so hungry for *fish*. They didn't exactly swim into his mouth, although he kept it open for quite some time. But, with a little searching, they weren't hard to find. There was a ridge in the sand, like a buried spine. Clear fish lurked between its ribs. They had red dots on their foreheads—or rather *in* them—which seemed to be made of jelly; and they tasted a lot like grapes, but not seedless ones, unfortunately. At first, they'd disappear as soon as they saw Søren. The little puffs of sand, as he approached, made him feel like he was under fire. But soon they began to venture out and nibble at his skin, presumably removing the pieces he didn't need. Then it was easy to grab their tails and pop them in his mouth. They didn't even seem to mind. Their tails felt like rose petals, and there were also sea cucumbers, which had the texture of burritos, and anemones, which tasted like noodles cooked in Sprite. Even the sea urchins were OK—though disconcertingly soft and fat inside—and Søren worried he might be ingesting too much sand.

The visibility underwater wasn't great. He had to be careful not to kick up dust. Someday, he'd travel to the Arctic, where the whales glided as if through air, and giant starfish roamed the plains like pulsing mounds of steak tartar!

But perhaps the best thing about having superpowers would be that Mother would have to recognize his talent, and Freja would have proof of her noble blood—assuming that she was actually related to him, of course.

But how was he to tell them? It was hard to think of any way to describe the Bug Fur Queen that wouldn't sound ridiculous. And he feared his powers would only work when no one was watching. If Eskild saw him now, for instance, he felt pretty sure he would drown.

He felt eyes on the back of his neck—literally!, he thought, letting the sticky sensation linger before he turned around. It was only fish, of course. He chased and devoured them, one by one, not even bothering to use his hands. He swam so fast, it occurred to him that his ears might pop. But they didn't even ache as he rocketed up and down. In fact, his hearing was better than ever, like an extended sense of touch. He could almost feel the fishes' words, like Braille, floating through the water. After a while, he could even understand most of them. Oddly, their popping dialect seemed to be related to the squirrels'.

He'd just begun searching for a Greenland shark when a boat, drifting overhead, began to roar. It sounded like someone shouting obscenities in the language of the fish. The hull was warty with mussels and bubbling with rust, but above the water, it looked white and fine. Its sides kept trying to knock Søren in the head, and its propeller beckoned seductively for him to meet it round back. It was heading for the cape, presumably, to give its passengers a view of the lighthouse before taking them back to Molde for lunch. Although tourists weren't rare, Søren always felt flattered by their presence. He imagined a family on deck, all rather tan, the mother reading a magazine, the father drinking something pink. The sister was just standing there, like a filmmaker, activist, and aspiring dermatologist, staring out to sea.

Well, Søren would give her a treat. He dove, then shot back toward the surface. He'd meant to arc gracefully over

the boat, but instead went straight up, settling for a second on an invisible ledge, before falling with a lurch back into the sea. He hoped the tourists hadn't seen.

He swam away to practice, and his jumps grew higher and bolder. Finally, with a burst of speed, he came back and leaped clean over the boat.

The family, which turned out to consist of two old men, looked up with all the amazement he could desire. One of them held a fishing pole, and Søren felt a moment's dread regarding the hook. But he swam away, trailing nothing behind him except the memory of the fisherman's face. He liked to think it had been transfigured by joy.

How he wished Freja could see him! He swam toward Grandma's house. Luckily, Freja was on the beach. He showed off for quite a while, but had to stop when the water got too shallow. He didn't think she'd noticed him, yet he couldn't bring himself to shout. It would have spoiled the effect; and, anyway, his lungs were full of water. He coughed it up as discretely as possible. The air felt painfully dry, but he soon got used to it again. As he waded ashore, Freja was staring right past him, shading her eyes.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"I thought I saw some dolphins," she said. "But they seem to have gone."

"I thought I saw them, too," he said. If she showed more interest, then he'd tell.

But she just said, "Mmm," and went back to her book.

The instant she began to read, he could smell it. The smell was like a murky window; through it, he was looking right into *Les Trois Mousquetaires*. But everything was bigger in Freja's mind. And she had an odd way of seeing the color blue… He took a deep sniff, and saw more clearly: the moonlight glimmering in the bourreau's axe. Milady de

Winter was about to be decapitated, and Søren was knocked off balance by Freja's delight. It smelled intensely of grass.

His new power would take a lot of getting used to. He could even smell his own thoughts. Too often, they smelled of glue. And when a particularly resonant memory made a particularly evocative smell, the smell would strengthen the memory, which strengthened the smell, and so on, until the stench could almost make him faint. For instance, there was the time Mrs. Walstrøm had asked someone to summarize *Der Ring*… Well, it was no good dwelling on that. The cure was to get lost in other people's thoughts, as long as they were nice. And they *were* nice, more often than not. This made him feel less guilty about intruding, as did the fact that he couldn't choose *not* to—except by avoiding his family altogether.

Family, Grandma thought, *are so important because they're the ones who'll take care of your dogs after you're dead*. She smiled, and the smell made Søren smile, too. They enjoyed sitting together more now that they could converse without talking.

Kai, too, was more pleasant now that you could smell his insides. He often meant well, bizarrely, and liked to pretend he was Flounder from the Little Mermaid cartoon.

Mag, during breakfast, often thought about the consistency of her morning poo. When it had been particularly nice, Søren felt a proprietary pleasure, as if they'd produced it together.

Jonas smelled of oranges and steak. He loved Søren; and Eskild loved him, too, though not quite as much as he'd hoped.

Olle's violet-scented thoughts, however, made Søren sad. Olle genuinely believed he and Jonas were going to live together on Otterøy forever, in this house, after Grandma died. He believed Jonas was the only person in the world

who really liked him. The saddest part was, he was almost right. Father Dorsten, for instance, didn't like Olle at *all*.

But even Jonas' friendship for Olle was partly an act. Søren had guessed this long before he became aware of its masking tape smell. It turned out *everyone* in Søren's family was patronizing Olle. The only remedy was to keep on doing it, better and better, and never let him know.

For if you pretended such things long enough, they became true. And there *was* a lot to like about Olle as a friend. He was interested in everything you had to say, but forgot it a minute later, which made him trustworthy. His dogged investment in a coloring book or board game could be contagious, and sometimes Søren spent all day with him without even remembering that he'd only agreed to play in order to be polite. Also, Father Dorsten owned almost every Disney musical on DVD. Since Olle wasn't fond of books, music was the best way for him and Søren to connect. And even Søren could use a soundtrack, sometimes: there were no musicals, either, after you were dead. At least, one could hope.

Furthermore, Jonas didn't like going to the parsonage. He thought Father Dorsten looked at him funny whenever he asked if Olle wanted to come outside and play. It was easy to make Jonas jealous, just by going over to Olle's for the day; and it was hard to decide which was nicer: the smell of Jonas' jealousy, or the stink Olle gave off when you made him feel like the most beautiful boy on Earth. It was increasingly easy to get him to sing.

In one respect, only, Søren's new nose was a curse: Mother didn't believe that Søren was special. He could smell it clearly now—the dutiful aloe vera when they lay together after lessons. He might as well have been one of the dogs, or Kai. She *thought* she was a good mom. But Søren had used to

imagine that she spent more time thinking about *him*.

She didn't even care about the family recital—not really. It was just an attempt to make things fun. Her strictness, except toward herself, was always insincere. She was even lying, Søren smelled, when she told that old story, meant to prove she cared, about pulling down her children's pants at night to check for worms.

It was a relief, however, to hear that the music she composed *did* sound better in her head. Perhaps it just needed the right performer. Perhaps, someday, that performer would be him!

At night, Eskild's dreams, wafting across the bedroom, often made Søren blush. Even during the day, about ten percent of Eskild's thoughts were of Freja, which is probably more than it sounds.

And Freja—her thoughts continued to burn. She was reading too many adventure stories, and not getting enough to eat.

Every day, Søren escaped the stink by sneaking off to practice living underwater. Fish had thoughts, too, but they all smelled fresh. He found some great shells, a rusty sword, and lots of trash. He was always on the lookout for presents, but nothing he found seemed so valuable on land, so he just ended up throwing it away again.

He tried to view the ocean as his home. Come September, after all, he'd be moving in for good. It would be easy to find plenty to eat then, too, he hoped. In the worst case, he'd just migrate. Some nights, he slept on the ocean floor, in a bed of crusty sand. He was rather frightened, at first, and always woke up when something was coming. But it never turned out to be dangerous.

When the others asked where he'd been, he just said, "camping." The ocean had become summer's equivalent of

reading a book under your desk: entering a secret world, so much better than anything available to the people around you. When Ms. Lund had mocked him for reading Moomintroll, which wasn't even "real," Søren had tried to explain the concept of fiction. This had turned out to be a lot harder than he'd thought.

"The good end happily, the bad unhappily; that is what fiction means," Jonas had once said, quoting Oscar Wilde. He was obviously expecting Søren to laugh, but the idea had just made him sad. While he could gloat over living in a richer world than his schoolmates, he felt bad about excluding his family from the Bug Fur Queen's domain. Really, he was just waiting for the right moment to let them in.

CHAPTER XXIV
A WEEK BEFORE THE RECITAL

AND SØREN still had two powers left to discover. He tried to intend to toss himself off a cliff seriously enough that he would acquire the ability to fly, but it didn't work. He tried to catch more butterflies, but they all got away. Finally, he discovered his next-to-last power while searching the island for a new place to read. His old perch had fallen down, and he was hoping to discover a similar tree, both smooth and soft, with a crotch so capacious, you could fall asleep in it without fear of rolling out. Whenever he walked in a certain direction, the blood flowed to the front of his body, as if pulling at his nose, so he kept going that way until he came to the well where Olle had sung so beautifully. It was still full of echoes, and Søren sat on the edge, bracing himself in case it crumbled, and wondered if it would be possible to fall in love with Olle. When Olle wasn't there, the answer sometimes seemed like yes.

He looked into the well and imagined the perfect tree. Then the island seemed to be stretching around him. The hills snapped as he fell. He landed on a sort of disc, an elongated instant that went spinning down a glibid hole. When the picture in his mind matched up with the picture in his eyes, they froze together with a crash. And there was the perfect tree. He was sitting in it. The wind ruffled its leaves, and its crotch seemed more welcoming than ever.

But now he was there, he no longer felt like reading. Instead, he used his new power to travel. First, he spurted, like a fish out of God's hand, to the top of the mountain. He didn't have long to enjoy the view, however, because as soon as he focused on another location—the beach of Freja—he found himself falling toward it. As he passed through the mountain, he had a sense of infinite space, a hidden enormity. But, a moment later, he came skittering out onto the sand, landing crablike at the edge of the waves.

He wanted to rest. It was so nice there. But he happened to think of all the parts of the ocean he'd never seen, and found himself plunging, down and down, until the sun was just a purple sputter. He looked around for lantern fish, then noticed something muscular in the dust. There was something so human about the way it arranged itself, like a man under a blanket, that Søren warped back to the surface. He was beginning to get the hang of it.

He floated for a while, through the blueness, until a swordfish drifted by. He chased it, or it him, until his side began to ache. But it wasn't just his side. His whole body seemed to be warning that if he got too far from Otterøy, the connection between him and it would snap, and he'd have to swim all the way back. Probably, he'd never get home again. Still, he pressed a little further—the pain was so sweet—before he let himself rebound, bouncing off the waves, until

he crashed into the ground.

This was the part of the garden known as "The Dogs' Graveyard." He'd made quite a crater in it. His feet, sinking among the marigolds, seemed to be taking a deep drink. His eyes could see at least twelve new shades of green. It seemed as if a mist had burned off the world, and he could hear faint music. The Bug Fur Queen was making it clear she was glad to have him back. The island was his home, and he'd never have to leave again. Yip sniffed happily around his thighs. There was something delicious in the ground. Dogs already had eternal life, yet Søren felt no more jealous, now, than if twenty generations of his own ancestors lay buried beneath his feet.

He felt transformed; yet no one, not even Jonas, seemed to notice the change. Perhaps he had always been this way. After all, the Bug Fur Queen had been his ancestor last year, too, even if he hadn't been able to recognize her gifts. He began to wonder if Jonas, too, could talk to animals, or breathe underwater. But he couldn't smell the answers; and people rarely thought about the things you wanted to know.

The summer kept accelerating; Søren only hoped it wouldn't end before he'd managed to let Freja know about her nobility, ideally making her believe she had discovered it for herself. He recommended Dinesen, Tolstoy, Malory, Sei Shonagon, de Saint-Exupéry, and Chrétien de Troyes, but Freja always had better things to read. Would she believe him if he just told her? Would she explode if he demonstrated powers she didn't also possess? Surely, her gifts would differ from his own; the Bug Fur Queen must have a special plan for each of her children, and Søren could hardly believe it included a painful and premature death.

Would Grandma let Freja stay on the island this fall? Surely, Freja could have anything she asked for. But Søren

could smell that she was already thinking about asking Mother to drive her home. She'd almost stopped eating altogether.

Søren just hoped that everyone would stay on the island a few days longer. During his trips through Otterøy, he'd felt its fibers loosening, fraying, preparing for something big to come through—even bigger than the Morra, who followed, rat-like, in his tunnels. When he stepped out into the light where normal people lived, he could tell she was still following him, under the ground, looking for an opportunity to fight. But he put her off again and again. He still hadn't found his final power.

CHAPTER XXV
IN THE HALL OF THE SQUIRREL KING, PART IV

THE family recital happened on the last Friday in August. The plan was to drive home the next morning, but Søren knew that was never going to happen. Mag went first because she wanted to get it over with. Her poem was good like a child's drawings are good. It lasted three minutes without telling any lies, and she seemed offended by the applause. Then Jonas did his head trick, Olle sang, which wasn't special, because he did it every day, and Mother played a piece by Niels Gade, which Søren forgot almost as soon as he had heard it. Grandma told the story of Jeanne d'Arc. Only Kai refused to perform, since he hated the sense it would give him of belonging to a group. There *was* a whiff of school about the whole affair—but how Søren would have loved school, if only it had been more of a temple to

high culture, or all the other students had been his relatives.

He was too nervous about playing the hole in Freja's play to worry about his subsequent duet with Mother. Freja had gotten a woman from the village to play the lion. She looked like the woman who had given Søren the baskets of mushrooms. The play started off OK. Eskild was wooden, Freja over-earnest, but their lines were good, and Søren was enthralled by the story of forbidden love. He hadn't attended many rehearsals, so the plot came as a bit of a surprise, especially when the woman from the village, increasingly convincing as a lion, snatched Freja in her jaws and ran away. The piano parted, the wall closed behind her with a ripple. Eskild looked surprised.

Although Søren hadn't quite discovered his final power, he couldn't refuse the Morra's fight. Now that he had to, he felt quite brave. It helped that he was the one doing the chasing. He chased her up the tallest tree. He chased her across the bottom of the sea. She jumped onto the top of the mountain, then down again, and he landed, wobbling, in her footsteps. Travelling faster than voices, he heard his family backwards, or at an angle, like echoes from the underworld. When he glimpsed their faces, they were always looking away. They seemed to be watching the place where they'd seen him disappear.

The Morra was obviously enjoying herself. At first, she thought she could lose him whenever she wanted. But every time she failed, she grew a little blacker, hairier, and more pungent. Her thoughts struck Søren like blasts of ink. Sliding in her footprints, he snarled them into discords. She turned to strike, but he stepped aside, feeling almost pity. She was like a raging toddler, and he'd have to grab her fists and hold them down.

He'd just managed to pluck a couple of bristles from her

tail when she dove into her cave, shutting the mountain behind her. In years past, Søren never would have tried to force his way in; now, he expected to be able to teleport, and was surprised when the rock resisted him. It felt like granulated honey, and he managed to tear his way through, but realized he'd have trouble getting out again, at least if he wished to do so quickly.

And it seemed likely that he might. The Morra was growling in a different way, now. Her teeth, like her eyes, produced their own green light: such a lurid spectacle, Søren had trouble believing it was real—or at least that he hadn't made the Morra up, even as her foetid breath and crackling hair reminded him of all the reasons he'd used to be afraid. Stepping backwards, he stumbled over Freja, whose body seemed even bigger, lying down.

He called on the Bug Fur Queen for help, but she didn't answer. Hadn't she prepared him for this? He could breathe underwater, talk to squirrels, and smell the Morra's thoughts—but they were no comfort. She was gloating. She'd been leading him on, and the rest of her plan was not intended to take very long.

He tried to teleport behind her, to grab her throat, but only managed to send himself surfing across the rock, barely avoiding a disastrous encounter with her paw. Sliding down the opposite wall, he wondered if his arm were broken. He wished the Morra would call a stop, but she just padded closer. Her purr made the gravel hop.

There was a knocking on the wall. The Morra looked up. Jonas appeared in a circle of light. The rest of Søren's family were behind him.

"Don't come in!" Søren tried to shout, but the doors had already hissed shut. Dazzled by the sun, he could only listen as the Morra stacked his family next to Freja, and smell how

much she enjoyed biting them, one by one—rather gently, since they couldn't escape.

As she bit Mother, however, something in Søren's despair clicked, followed by a draining sound. It felt as if he were losing not only his powers, but his ordinary senses, as well. The darkness lost its resentment, the ordinary flicker of weakness and fear that lit his way at school. He no longer felt responsibility for the anger gathering in his hands. They began to hum and glow. If this were his last power, he didn't like it. It wasn't his fault. He watched his wrists mistrustfully, hoping the bones wouldn't shoot through the skin. But they kind of did. His vision turned white. His jaws clamped shut. He lifted the cold mass, and fired.

The Morra stumbled, looking surprised. Søren already wished he could take it back. He felt the metal searching for her heart, digging through fur and fat. She howled—less like a woman than a dog, and Søren felt sorry. He dropped his gun. But she was already slumping, knock-kneed. Then she was lying down.

As Søren drew nearer, he could almost pretend she was just a pile of carpets. The phosphorescence was already fading from her face. But as he reached out to touch her cheek, her eyelids fluttered, and he pulled back.

Moonlight was filling her—a song. Søren had forgotten that Olle was even there, but now he stood, as if bewinged, and sang the music of the Bug Fur Queen. It rose around him, shivering the chips of rock. It sounded like Schubert mixed with Rachmaninoff, but it *looked* more like a harp. Its strings ran through the Morra, binding, transposing her. They raised her up. She grinned as if it didn't hurt. But it must have hurt, for it was healing her. Her coat turned white and tumbled to the floor. Her claws slid back into her hands. She *had* hands, now, and they were grasping the halo that

swirled pavonically from her tail. It almost filled the room before it collapsed, and she gathered it around her like a sheet. Her eyes cooled from gold to blue, and the air in front of them shimmered like a mirror. She had the most beautiful blonde hair, and Søren's mouth went dry at the thought of what—or who—she might become.

He squeezed Olle's hand, and Olle turned to look. He smiled, temporarily losing the thread of his song, and the Morra, having regained enough of her strength, seized the moment to turn black again. She grabbed his song and swung. It shattered, launching Søren to the back of the cave. Uncle Jonas broke his fall.

The Morra roared and rolled and shook the music out of her, then looked up, steaming. The expression on her face was obscene. She smelled terrible, but in a way she rather liked. She'd never really felt pain before, and had kind of enjoyed it. Søren knew how she felt. He groped around for his weapon, but the Morra was crushing it under her paw.

"It's OK," Jonas said. "We're ready to die." He even held out his arms.

Fragments of Olle's song still littered the floor. By their fading light, Søren could distinguish Mother, holding Freja in her lap. She was looking at Søren—or rather behind him—with a peculiar expression in her eyes. Søren reached out for Freja's hand, but at that moment, the Morra turned his head around with a crack. Freja's hand squeezed back. Her soul rang like a gong, and Søren watched it rise, as if reflected in a puddle, while his vision drained away. It condensed into the shape of a sword; and the sword was the only thing left after everything else was gone.

It was silent here, with nothing but the sword. And then there was his hand. He lifted it, surprised to find that he could move. He sat up and tested his neck. It didn't hurt.

Not too much. His other hand came into focus, now. It was unusually white. He walked around for a while—on what, he wasn't sure. The ground was entirely black and flat, more an idea separating the nothing above from the nothing below than an actual sheet of glass.

He took a breath, with a sense that time was passing too quickly here. Perhaps it was even moving in the wrong direction. He was aware that if he didn't return soon, he wouldn't find his family in any condition, whether they'd escaped from the Morra or not. He was strangely unworried by the thought.

No matter how far he wandered, the sword held its position relative to him, floating at a constant height. The longer he walked, on such smoothness, the farther he wished to go. He couldn't rid himself of the thought that eventually there would be a horizon, or a moon.

But there was nothing but the sword. Finally, there was nothing for him to do but sit and watch it glow. If he listened hard enough, he could even hear it ring. He knew that as soon as he touched it, he would return to the fight. He felt as if he'd rather just stay here forever.

His hand closed around the hilt, and he fell back into the cave.

He recognized the look on Mother's face. It was the moment before the Morra turned his head around. He dove to the floor at Mother's feet, and grabbed Freja's sword. It was heavier than he'd expected. It was covered with jewels. Again, the Morra was reaching for his head, and he didn't have time to lift his sword.

A rock bounced off the Morra's ear. It wasn't large, or Mag wouldn't have been able to throw it. But the Morra turned, and Søren slashed her cheek. She stepped back, giving him room to charge. He tried to pin her to the wall,

pressing his blade until it squealed. She steamed and stank, sliding upwards. There was a ripping sound, and great drops of fat sprang out. Her screams made the stalactites fly away like bats.

Really, her suffering was overdone. Was that a *twinkle* in her eyes? Her favorite kind of game, after all, was one where in the end you got to die. All he could do was press harder, and hope this truly was her end. But her cinders swirled around her like autumn leaves, and some of them got away. Her bones melted into the rock, turning orange, blue, then gold. Her eyes were the last things to go, fixed on Søren till they popped.

The cave groaned as it cooled. For a long time, he couldn't get Freja's sword out.

"We can't just leave her behind," Eskild said, helping him pull.

At a certain temperature, the rock turned sugary and broke. There was a tunnel behind it, leading up into the mountain. It was the only way to go, so Søren went.

Instantly, he knew a lot about this place.

The sky was unusually high and pale. The sun, though dim, was kinder than outside, never letting you freeze or burn. The flowers were mostly epiphytes, and didn't die when they were picked. They didn't have bright colors, but smelled terrific, and in the winter, they even grew on snow. Every season made a pleasant change, but autumn was the most beautiful of all, because there was no school. No school was probably the defining feature of this world.

"Are we allowed to come? It was me who threw the rock," Mag said.

He helped her up. He helped everyone. Jonas' hand felt surprisingly tulip-like. It was roughly the same age as his, now.

"Look," he said.

The sword was turning into Freja again. Søren let go as soon as she could stand up on her own. Her arms were as silver as her hair, and all her freckles were gone. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but just sighed. Søren wondered if she remembered dying.

He led them quickly away from the cave, out into the world beneath the high, pale sky. Jonas seemed to know it pretty well already.

There were lots of people, but it never felt crowded, because people never formed crowds. They never talked too loud, but at appropriate times, they laughed. Everyone was related, but only distantly. Even Mother looked more like a second cousin, now. She looked a lot like Mag, but prettier, and Søren led her to the music room, where pianos in almost every shape were capable of making almost every possible sound. Each day you were allowed to choose a new one; in fact, it was almost impossible to find the same piano twice.

Mother sat down at a lilac baby grand. It had been discovered that morning inside a nenuphar, floating on the lake. It couldn't be moved, of course, so Mother had to swim. As she played a Chopin prelude, rain began to fall. The lake whispered, and its picture disappeared. The piano bent as Mother finished, and the flower closed and sank behind her as she swam slowly back to shore.

Olle looked as if he were hearing other people's music for the first time.

"Mother?" Søren said, helping her out of the lake. "Will you give Olle piano lessons?"

"Sure," she said. But she didn't look as if she remembered his name.

Søren found Grandma in the library. Her big teeth and bright red hair came as a surprise, and she had lots of little

moles. Instead of knitting, she was reading a book, but in a way that made it seem like she worked there. When Mag hugged her, she frowned and said "Shhh."

Holding hands, Jonas, Søren, and Mag wandered through the library. It was bigger than Russia, according to the floor map, yet the book you wanted was always near to hand, or else you found something even better while you searched. There were miles of handwritten music, and many rooms were like a dinosaur museum, but no two were quite the same: one was made of ivory, another emerald, but the most beautiful, Søren thought, appeared to have been carved out of a single piece of wood, including the bannisters, tyrannosauruses, and winding stairs. The cellars were full of bizarrely massive furniture, draped in sheets, and there were animal heads mounted here and there. They tended not to be dead, and would even answer questions, if you found the right tone. Once, as Søren walked by an owl, it called a moose pedantic, and the moose pulled its head back into the wall, and was never seen again. In addition to books and skeletons, there were statues, paintings, and dioramas, some of which were actually children doing tableaux vivants. Søren's favorite was "Karl Knutson in Viipuri Castle," accompanied by Sibelius in a music box.

When they came to the Reading Room of the Sky, Mag seated herself beneath a brachiosaurus whose head was lost in clouds. Along its vertebrae, swallows nested. Their poo dried as it came down, turning into marshmallow that evaporated if you didn't eat it right away, and evaporated even more delightfully if you did, so you never got full, and it made no mess. It was the perfect snack for reading. The swallows' feathers, however, tasted burnt.

Instead of reading, Mag began to write. She used a quill pen and started at page one. She had eleven inkwells too

choose among, each carved from a different color stone, as well as a pot of umber, and a rack of phials, half-full of seed pearls, lapis, malachite, and gold. She chose green ink for her name, and squidged some silver underneath. She was writing the story of her life, and it turned out to be much more interesting than Søren had expected.

Most of the books in the library were hand-written. Aside from the music box, and a wind chime or two, music was not recorded inside the mountain. Likewise, fruit was never canned. People didn't take photographs. They weren't fond of looking at themselves in mirrors. They weren't fond of looking at themselves in ponds. They enjoyed looking at each other, though, because everyone was attractive, in the manner of an animal, even if you wouldn't have thought so in the outside world.

Their beauty was moved by passions as simple as themselves. They contemplated the sublime image of intelligence without much searching, and found what they desired: low foreheads, highly-developed temples, and ligatures in bas-relief, which no stone could have shown to greater advantage. Their manner of thought gave them an admirably short theme: few means existed to vary it, and by reproducing it without cease, they constantly perfected its few details—especially the ones that were easy to render. That's how their beauty reached perfection.

They didn't ask a lot of questions, and expected no answers to their prayers. But they were praying all the time, and always to the same God. No one knew who had built all the small white churches. No one was sarcastic: it would have been hard to understand them if they were; and in the end, the joke would have been on them.

The people in the mountain made objects by hand, or else found them growing on trees. Flutes and harps were in great

demand. But people didn't like carrying things around. When they left something behind, it usually turned into grass. When they threw something away, it usually turned into a tree.

There were no houses, because everywhere was home. You could sleep inside any large tree, which often contained bunk beds and a slide, or in any meadow, where a tent fringed with lanterns would grow over your head, if necessary. If you woke up hungry, you could usually find raspberries nearby: black, gold, or the richest red. There were raspberries everywhere inside the mountain, and no matter where you came from, they smelled like your true home.

The following things did not exist: dwarves, concept art, video games, memorized jokes, modern architecture, celebrities, role models, discontent, beer, tickets, aggressive smiling, cars, obituaries, locks, computers, sitcoms, grievances, spirituality, quinoa, feminism, acronyms, poems about climate change, social science, magic, viruses, psychology, *Doctor Zhivago*, professional sports, advertising, sound bites, the humanities, publishing, British popular historians, search engines, "creative writing," scare quotes, print jobs, respawning, treadmills, jogging, movies, the sound of TV news, TV, news, most sounds, American English, the words *obviously, liminal, vintage,* or *height-dth*, empathy, unsympathetic portrayals of fathers, evil priests, non-prescriptive linguistics, wine, civil rights, cartoon characters kissing, reclaimed terms of abuse, progress, antiracism, sustainability, cult classics, genitalia, breathy indie voices, career fairs, careers, math teachers who apologize for being terrible artists, the "gender" sections in bookstores, landscape architecture, seminars, indigenous peoples, fashion, showcasing, most kinds of clothes, people who pretend to dislike Tchaikovsky, people who brag about their own misanthropy, *homogenous* pronounced *homo-genius,* the

sound of people eating on the radio, radio, Mac stores, butter statues, people who like Shakespeare "for the language," or opera "for the music," food without calories, masturbation, apps that try to take the shame out of illiteracy, anything sustainable, humane, inclusive, recycled, transparent, or biodiverse, documentaries, hypochondria, noir pastiche, classic films, privacy policies, life expectancies, positive change, disparagement of the Middle Ages, prizes, the facial expression people use to let you know you're saying something wrong, most facial expressions, electric guitars, tattoos, humanism, self-fulfillment, the politicization of the past, the arts, the term "classical" music, as if there were any other kind worth mentioning, wildcat mascots, the phrase "spending time," guitars in church, saxophones, instructions beginning "simply," the words *subversive* or *irreverent,* except as terms of abuse, critical theory, deconstruction, Foucault, Lacan, communist sympathies, pornography, poetry that doesn't rhyme, book clubs, celebrity audiences, Barbara Kingsolver, Susan Sontag, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, rhizomatic thinking, that stuff you have to scratch off gift cards, God-voice, Steve Reich, antipathy toward elitism, privilege, or hierarchy, pretty much any sort of critique, superhero franchises, panpipes, people wishing to be thought brave for eating condiments after their expiration dates, CNN, talk radio, the New York Times, people who blame their problems on "overthinking" or "getting in their heads," drag queens, Monty Python, Russian popular music, Chinese ballet spectaculars, Cirque du Soleil, the way teenagers speak, literary magazines, the word *yummy*, catching sight of your own nose, saying "blaming the victim" as if that were a bad thing, most oil paintings, except of aristocrats and their dogs, all academic reference to "the body" or "the other," most Hitler analogies, most wet dreams, the musical

Les Misérables, coffee shops called *Grounds* for anything, coffee, shops, activists, audiences giving themselves rounds of applause, postmodernism, sliding doors, fictional portrayals of happy gay men, vinyl fences, those little stickers on American fruit, refrigerator noise, catchphrases, the term *narrative*, the attitude of finding something "troubling," Toni Morrison, Somerset Maugham, styrafoam, sticker residue, personal electronics, awards for design, China, America, India, democracy, global cities, sweet yogurt, egalitarianism, diversity, shallow sinks, Bob Dylan, modern dance, ecosystems, most novels about people who have affairs, electronic music, music with "a beat," other people's doodles, the phrase "sharp-tongued," especially when applied to Austen heroines, socks that are hard to get into, Febreze, fear, malice, the words *knowledgeable*, *intersection*, or *relevant*, people pretending to think paper is an impressive invention as compared to, say, airplanes, motorcycles, cats.

Even dogs did not exist, but they were hardly missed, since the people inside the mountain were nearly as good. Everyone inside the mountain was a dead white male, especially the women. There *were* diseases, but no infectious ones. There were mammoths, though people knew better than to try to make them into pets. Dying of old age, people felt like children falling asleep, impatient for tomorrow. They never stopped looking like children, either. People traveled by walking, and instead of reaching their destinations, usually ended up somewhere better. There were lots of accidents involving waterfalls, which made everyone sad, but they quickly forgot—except for one boy, obviously a relation of Mother's, who made it his job, each time, to plant a rose. "I like to see them rise again," he said. But perhaps he just meant people who looked like them. Søren was pretty sure he'd seen Cynthia, once, pricking her finger to give the boy

a source of red.

It was easy to make friends inside the mountain, since everyone was basically the same. Although new friends might never see each other again, they parted each day without regret. Jonas and Søren, however, found each other almost every day. They might meet on a raft in the middle of the river, or under the shadow of a large bird. Often, they'd see one another when looking up from the page of a book, and their curiosity would ripple, then overflow.

Inside the mountain, memory gathered in pools, and there was little wind. During his first weeks—or were they years?—Søren occasionally saw Mag and Grandma, or Eskild and Freja, and he often went to hear Olle and Mother play ("Why don't you play something by Niels Gade?" Søren asked. "Who?" Mother said.) But he never saw Kai again. Perhaps he was dead. Perhaps a beneficent force had changed him beyond recognition. Perhaps he was one of those blue fish, snapping grace notes off the lake. Or was he one of those especially small children who had learned how to fly? They generally shunned pedestrians.

Everyone else seemed to have forgotten about the world outside, but Søren went back, oftener and oftener, to look. The Morra's cave seemed to have filled with water, or something even clearer, and images flowed in from all over the world. There was Grandma's house, like a reflection on wet sand. He tried to sink in, but it pushed him back. He eased up, and it began to swallow his hand. Alarmed, he pulled out. Running his fingers over the surface, he stirred up the beginning of Sibelius' Sixth Symphony, mixed with Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*. It reminded him of the time Hanne had been nice to him, and all the letters to Eskild he'd never sent. In fact, he'd never sent *any* letters to Eskild, and felt relieved by that now.

But what had happened to Yip and Yap? Was there anyone to feed them, or were they already dead?

Søren went for a splash in the creek. Usually, it carried one's troubles away. This time, however, his tristesse felt more like rain: windless, perpetual, it wasn't cheered by mammoths, it swallowed Mother's music, and made even Jonas' outline blur, at times. He began to see pictures from the Morra's cave everywhere he went, like shadows on the grass. He could hear them patter—"If you *had* grown up? Or just let her die?" He began chatting with his ancestor, whenever he got the chance.

Today, his ancestor had a loosely knit cap on his white hair, like the net people usually put on children to keep their curls in place.

"Those are lovely," Søren said.

The boy was trying to breed a rose as clear as glass.

"It's a matter of individual taste," he answered, "but certainly the rose would have far more proponents than detractors."

Søren asked to be shown all of his ancestor's flowers. "Often, I don't pick any flowers even if they are right in front of me," Søren reassured him. "But I'll have to tell Mother about these."

"Telling someone that something is beautiful doesn't always mean giving him possession of its beauty," the ancestor said, and cut the most beautiful rose for Søren, who held it carefully by the stem.

They talked for a long time about Grandma's house, how Søren had never seen its like in the outside world. The ancestor seemed to take credit for how grotesque this would seem:

"Imagine the Church of the Intercession of the Holy Virgin on the Nerl surrounded by a parking lot," he said, but

Søren couldn't even think of it except in relation to greensward and a lake.

"People err in not finding old furniture beautiful," the ancestor said. "The fault lies with the house and it's this that should be changed."

"In the case of Moss," Søren said, "I suppose you'd have to start with a bomb."

The ancestor smiled. Then he frowned. "Now I must show you something else," he said. "Please follow me through these bushes."

They went up a path made of white sand. It was exhausting, but each step seemed to raise you a hundred feet. When they finally reached the top, it seemed as if all the ancestor had wanted was to let Søren admire the view. It looked like early-morning dreams, running tight beneath his eyelids.

"Did you ever know Sibelius?" the ancestor asked.

"Not in the flesh," Søren replied.

"Once, he told me, in German—not long before I died—'We make ourselves unhappy by desiring and praising only one thing. By becoming too one-sided in trying to find contentment, we become incapable of understanding the essential innocence of things outside ourselves. Unfortunately, we term those things important that are the objects of our emotions, while those things that have no relation to our longing we call unimportant. Yet, many times, exactly the opposite is true.'"

Søren looked at the ancestor closely. Was he going to reveal the location of Sibelius' Eighth Symphony? But if he'd found it, why continue to dig?

"It's always hard, taking one's own advice," Søren remarked. He wanted to cry, but just stood there till the ancestor took his hand. Without being told, it seemed he

understood that Søren had only been trying to do the right thing, trapping his family inside the mountain.

But what would happen if they chose to leave?

The ancestor didn't believe they were, any longer, capable of choice.

Perhaps everyone knew about the Morra's lair, and went there, sometimes, to look. Perhaps it was a secret they kept from each other out of kindness, or because whenever they weren't thinking about it, they forgot? Perhaps it was still possible to return to school!

Although he didn't mention it to his ancestor, Søren was also worried about things getting *in.* The hole was growing, its water turning into air. Once, he threw a rock in, and for a while it sank—but then it fell. The Morra wasn't gone, of course. Søren had often seen her, through the inverted telescope of her cave: a tiny, middle-aged woman, standing on an iceberg as if she wanted it to sink. He opened his mouth, intending to call to her—the Wisp in him longed for the Wisp in her. She'd flown in all directions when she died. One piece had even landed in his eye. Perhaps it was the reason he could no longer cry. At Mother's recitals, he'd just sit there, dry, while everyone around him dripped.

He began to fear he *was* the Morra. Perhaps he always had been. After all, she never appeared when he wasn't there. Eskild had never even heard of her until Søren told him. It was just another disguise, surely, her wearing Ms. Lund's hair? And in the cave, Mother's peculiar gaze may not have been directed *behind* him… Perhaps the only person who had jumped through the wall, carrying Freja in his mouth, had been Søren! He could faintly remember how murderously jealous of her he'd been. And it seemed only plausible that he'd have spent so much time, chasing himself.

Winter wasn't as nice as it had been before. The snow

turned sharp. Its flowers died of cold. People began staying in the same house several nights in a row, lighting fires and collecting trash. They began waking up together instead of starting each day alone. They started making jam, which was fun, but each new batch tasted more and more the same. And next to the market where they sold the jam, there was a booth where an extremely fat girl began to charge for the piggyback rides she'd once given for free. Plastic was discovered, by the same boy who'd invented dynamite (he'd recently acquired zits). He'd read about them in a novel, he said, but he wouldn't tell Søren which.

The piano flowers stopped blooming, harps no longer grew on trees, and the dinosaur museum began to charge admission. Søren's ancestor no longer seemed so eccentric, digging holes beside the path. But the path was turning into a road. After some accidents, no new children acquired the ability to fly, and the ones who had grew increasingly indistinguishable from birds. One day, Søren even heard whispers about opening a school. Soon, the whispers were being spoken out loud.

As the Morra sailed closer, Søren's memories of school sharpened, while the world inside the mountain began to feel more and more like a dream. He could watch, but not hear, other people sing. When he skinned his knee, he did not believe in the pain. He'd wake up in the middle of the night, having to pee, but nothing came. Even raspberries began to taste of ash.

Jonas didn't notice Søren's gloom. It seemed as if he were watching a video of Søren, repeating the same happiness every day, and Søren began to take less and less comfort from their games. He might stop running, halfway through a field, and let Jonas go on chasing his mirage. Or he might stop talking, halfway through a story, and watch Jonas listen,

rapt, until the end. It went the other way, too. Often, watching Jonas dive from a pine tree, he couldn't tell the difference between his friend and wind.

Still, there was plenty to distract him in the subterranean abundance of food and friends, music and prayer, books and work—for there were always manuscripts to copy, and berries to pick. The conflation of work and play inside the mountain only meant there were more of both.

Damningly, however, Søren's sense of progress left him. While the others were mastering new languages, or inventing them, constructing mathematical proofs, or artificial wings, (it was thought the flying children would enjoy being chased, or at least benefit from it), in short, while everyone else was learning something new, Søren felt increasingly sure that what he really needed to learn lay in the world he'd left behind.

One day, after he couldn't hear a single note of Mother's recital, or see the light on the walls, even though it was Ravel, he decided to buy some dynamite. He didn't understand it, quite, but intended to use it right away.

The boy with pimples, however, said it would cost a thousand shells, or at least one really good one. But the only shells Søren could find belonged to valved snails or pea clams, and he just as often lost them again, or, riding in his pockets, they were reduced to sand. It felt even more sordid when people began buying things with butterfly wings. Money had seemed like a great idea at first, but gradually revealed itself as a harbinger of change. The world inside the mountain was bending, cracking; a dry wind kept blowing things in—"If only they'd been given time to assimilate!" Mother might have said. But she didn't even notice, one day, when songbirds arrived from Norway. They were fine, in and of themselves—but they didn't belong. Neither did the

crickets, with their harsh new sound, or the big grey squirrels, who seemed to think there was something to fear. It hurt your feelings, how they ran away. But only Søren seemed to care.

It was all his fault, he knew, and over the years, his guilt grew from something like a mosquito, buzzing around his ears, to a bag of dead raccoons, slung around his neck. He dreamed he was totally alone, and kept saying, "I hoped there would be laughter in heaven." When he woke up, the lily he was sleeping in had begun to smell like a rose.

He rolled out of bed, slowing the petals as they curled back, and headed towards the cave. By the time he got there, it had opened onto the sea. Swimming, he thought, would clear his head. He wouldn't have to swim all the way home in order to see if it were possible never to come back. There were so many directions to take—so many islands made of sand!

At least, it seemed that way until he got a good look at this grey expanse, like a swimming pool crossed with outer space. Considering his gifts, he felt oddly out-of-place. Perhaps it was the absence of waves. He kept his head dry as long as he could, although the water was so thin, he didn't even blink when it rose over his eyes. He took a deep breath, bracing himself for the nonexistent chill, and began to swim.

There was nothing in every direction: no dolphins, no fish, no seaweed, no bubbles, no twitching, no ripples, no haze, no squid, no garbage, no turtles, no algae, no squiggles, no motes, no sunlight, no sloshing, no scum, no krill, no plankton—no waves! That was the main thing. It was like watching Kai kill bugs, and Søren felt so lonely, he became nostalgic for literally everything. He told himself he was aiming for an island, not far beyond the horizon. He'd pull himself up the rocky shore. A seagull would fly screeching

overhead, and someone would be out looking for him. He could distinctly smell cinnamon buns.

Then a point appeared on the horizon. A prick. A fleck. Was it his destination, or some Thing to point the way? It grew—ragged, shaggy. Now Søren could feel the water. It was cold. He could hear it shudder, turning to ice. Shivering, he watched the Morra rise. When she was as close as the full moon, he reached out to touch her; she was already offering him her hand. In a few days, at most, their fingers would meet! A golden knowledge lit her eyes. *She,* at any rate, knew what was right. She would take him home. She loved him—always had.

But, at the decisive moment, he drew back. The moon turned gray, and he sank back into the sea, holding Freja's shell. He waited, but no new offer came, so he turned and swam for land: slowly at first—then faster. He couldn't hear anything, but it seemed important not to look back.

For the fleck was still there. He could feel it reaching through the water. His ankles kept getting caught in ice. He broke free again and again, then swam along the bottom till the surface cleared.

At last, the water was shallow enough for him to run. He was relieved to find the shore was still there. He scraped his arms, hurrying out of the hole. He doubted the Morra was *right* behind him, but he didn't want to give himself time to change his mind.

The boy with pimples helped him up. He took his shell, and gave Søren the dynamite. The hole was puckering, preparing for something big. It nearly swallowed the dynamite as Søren fumbled with his matches. He was just getting them wet. Then a spark flew; the fuse began burning too close to the charge. Without really taking time to stand, Søren ran. The blast lifted him off his feet, then set him

gently down again. Probably, he had a talent for landing. Really, he was lucky to be alive! He'd hardly listened as the boy with zits had given him instructions. It had seemed like nothing else would matter, once the hole was gone.

"Phew!" he said, trying to mean it. But it was impossible, really, to worry about anything, anymore. The blush was returning to his world. The piano flowers were blooming—you could see their glorious chords rising into the air. He'd had a lucky escape, that was all. In fact, mightn't you say he'd saved everyone, once again? He heard Bach in the distance. Was that Olle? Sometimes it was hard to tell, now that he'd taught so many people to sing.

No—it wasn't Olle. It wasn't even Bach. It was the flute from *L'après-midi d'un faune,* and Søren waited for Jonas to finish before he told him what he'd done.

"Good," Jonas said, throwing his instrument away. It immediately became part of the lawn.

The important thing now was badminton; some children had started a game in which racial honor was at stake. There were a surprising lot of Finns in heaven. The badminton rackets, Søren was relieved to see, were growing on trees again, and the birdies, though not actual birds, did have the pleasing habit of flying away.

For once, Søren's team won. They rested on the foundation of the school, which was already turning to dirt.

"When do you think it will be done?" Søren asked.

"What?" the girl said.

"The school," he said. But he didn't think she even understood the word.

Her friend turned around. She looked a lot like Mrs. Dag-og-Nat.

"Do you think there used to be a church here?" she asked.

"Yes, that must be it," Søren said, and a weight fell off

his heart.

While the others sipped nectar, he sneaked away to take one last look at the Morra's cave. He realized it would probably be the last time he ever sneaked.

But the hillside looked remarkably calm, as if the stones had lain this way for a thousand years. He put his hands on the biggest one, but the only pulse he felt was his own. There was no breath, no light. The hole wasn't just closed; it was gone, along with the entire world it had led to.

With no leak in it, the wind smelled superb. The air was full and nourishing again. Walking away, Søren felt so light he nearly joined the smallest children in the sky. There, the clouds appeared equally soft and cold.

Grandma's favorite poem ran through his mind:

I inherited a dark forest where I seldom go.
But one day the dead and the living shall change places.
Then, the forest will quiver!

The worst crimes remain unsolved
despite the efforts of many police officers.
In the same way, in each of our lives,
a great love remains unsolved.

I inherited a dark forest, but I'm walking in a lighter one, today.
Everything living that sings, slithers, creeps, flaps!
It is spring, and the air is very strong.
I have an exam from the University of Forgetting
and go as emptyhanded as a shirt on the washing line.

Søren's ancestor was humming in the dirt. Butterflies were settling all over him like bits of sky. He appeared to be content, although his roses hadn't turned out quite clear this time. Really, they looked more like iceberg lettuce; but he'd have plenty of time to get them right, or decide he genuinely preferred red.

So many waveless days ahead! Søren sat and helped him dig.